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OF ALL BOOKSELLERS



“SEEING AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ATTACK, JACK SPRANG FORWARD
AND SWUNG THE AXE.”

[See page 147.]

THE SETTLER OF SERPENT CREEK

A TALE OF THE CANADIAN PRAIRIE

BY

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WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
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THE SETTLER OF SERPENT CREEK

CHAPTER I

THE LURE OF GOLD

"WELL? What do you think of it?" asked the young rancher with ill-controlled excitement as he stood in the private office of Curtis Newnes, the well-known assayer of the West.

The white-haired expert raised his eyes from the little heap of sand which lay on a sheet of white paper on the table before him. He was a benevolent-looking gentleman, and there was a sympathetic smile on his face as he turned from the magnifying-glass towards his visitor.

"It is gold right enough, Mr Munroe," was the slow answer.

"Worth working?" came the eager interruption.

The venerable head moved slowly from side to side, and the thin lips were pursed to a silent "No."

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"If you happen to be holiday-making and have nothing better to do than to wash sand on the off-chance of picking up a few grains of dust—well, then it might be worth while."

"But otherwise?"

"Raising pigs would be more profitable."

The sand once more came under the glass. Jack Munroe stood silently watching the second examination.

It was bitterly disappointing. This supposed discovery of gold in a corner of his ranch had meant more to him than he could put into words. He had studied a slight amount of geology at school and as a private hobby, and he had been convinced that the find at Serpent Creek was but the shadow of a great fortune. It was not so much for his own advantage that he cared. His twenty years were quite capable of finding bread and butter and an occasional scraping of jam to supply all his individual necessities. But there were other reasons why his hopes had been so great—reasons which will be obvious shortly.

So certain of the merit of his find had Jack been that he had taken the trouble to arrange some other matter of business so that he could travel upwards of one hundred and thirty miles to kill both the birds with one stone, and consult expert opinions on each. The one affair

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related to a legal point concerning his land. The other, as we know, was that most exciting of all pioneer affairs : a " gold-find ! "

There had been two reasons which convinced Munroe of the advisability for taking so long a journey to consult an assayer. First, he had no intention of provoking a gold-scramble to his homestead. Such would certainly follow the slightest rumour of his discovery. The second reason was to consult the best expert available. Curtis Newnes was famed from East to West. He was reputed as being one of the wealthiest men in Canada, though, it is true, no one seemed to have a very clear idea as to how he came by so much property. An ordinary assayer does not have many opportunities for amassing riches, since his work mainly consists of making examinations for his clients. But the fact remains that Newnes was without doubt a man of great means, and the position that he held in his profession had inspired Munroe's confidence.

But now it seemed that the long journey had been taken for no purpose, or, at least, a futile one. Evidently nothing remained for him but to swallow his disappointment with good grace, and return to the more prosaic hopes of an ordinary rancher's success.

Still, there was something considerably

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stubborn about Jack Munroe. Once he had made up his mind on any point he found it very difficult to change his opinion. He had been convinced that he had made an important discovery, and in spite of the assayer's decision, and in spite of his better reason which told him that an aged expert was more likely to be able to judge correctly than an amateur geologist who had not long since been occupying a desk in an English public school—in spite of these facts, he found himself instinctively disbelieving what Newnes had said. Yes; it was stupid of him. He felt that. At the same time, many of us are sometimes stupid to our great advantage.

However, for the moment, there was nothing more that remained to be said on the matter, so Munroe straightened himself as he held out his hand for the return of his sample of dust.

“Well, I am much obliged to you for the trouble that you have taken, Mr Newnes. If ever you are in the direction of Serpent Creek—though that's not very likely, human beings being mighty scarce in the district—I'll be glad to see you.”

The old man looked up at the boy's frank face.

“It is very kind of you. One never knows

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where one will turn up (or down) in this world. Perhaps I might find Serpent Creek in my route one of these days, and then it will give me great pleasure to renew a very brief acquaintance. Somewhere near Saskatoon, is it not?"

"About forty miles. It is a branch of the Saskatchewan valley."

"I know. Well, I'll bear it in mind, and hope to look you up one of these fine days. About this gold—I am very sorry to disappoint you. But if this is a fair sample of the dirt—well, it would be unfair to deceive you with hopes which I am confident you would never realise."

"You don't think there might be something better if one took the trouble to look for it?"

The old man smiled indulgently.

"I should not like to say 'impossible,' because we never can tell what we may find anywhere. But to be frank—brutally frank, I'm afraid—you might just as well search these streets outside for dollar bills. You *might* find one that somebody had lost. Dollar bills have been found on the street before this. But would you think it worth while to neglect your usual work on the chance of picking up money that way?"

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"No," the young rancher was forced to admit with a laugh, "I would not. Still, in a matter of this sort, I had a sort of idea that the little might indicate the more—if only the source could be found."

Again the assayer smiled in the fascinating manner that always rendered him so attractive.

"My dear young friend, I could tell you of hundreds of lives which have been utterly ruined by just such ideas as these. Once let the idea of possible gold creep into the heads of some people, then they will sacrifice everything by searching after dreams. The gold-fever is one of the diseases that good advice seldom cures. But you may trust me. Take the medicine of good advice while there is time. There comes a day when it is too late to attempt a cure. Stick to your ranch at—Serpent Creek, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Well, stick to it, and you will have a fair chance of being a happy man."

"Thanks," returned Munroe with quiet courtesy. "Well, I need not detain you any longer. May I ask your fee?"

"Five dollars," the assayer answered, as he tilted the sand from the paper into the little leather bag in which it had been brought, and returned the sample to the owner. "I always

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charge that sum for an examination and an opinion. There are cases when I feel that I would like to reduce it—such as at present when the result is so unfavourable. But I think it is wise to keep to one fee for all cases.”

“Much better,” said Munroe as he produced the money.

“Yet I wish it might have been a more satisfactory return to you.”

“Not at all,” was the casual response.

“We pay money to save money very often. Your profession is not to please people, but to tell them the truth.”

“Quite so; quite so. To tell them the truth. Most excellently expressed, my young friend. Most excellently expressed.”

The old man’s unctuous manner was beginning to get upon Munroe’s nerves. He hastened to terminate the interview.

“Well, good-bye, and many thanks!” he said hurriedly.

“Good-day to you!” returned Newnes.

Then the young rancher strode out from the office.

The assayer waited patiently as he heard the footsteps of his late visitor departing through the outer office, nor did he move from this attitude of close attention until he heard the outer door close.

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Then he sighed, the contented, long-drawn breath of a man who has made a discovery and is perfectly satisfied with the result. He lit a cigarette, turned to his office chair, and sat back therein—smiling thoughtfully while the smoke curled from his nostrils or crept gently between the thin lips of his clean-shaven face.

Presently he bent forward, took the magnifying-glass in his hand and intently examined a few grains of sand which he had managed to spill on the blotting-pad as he was returning the rest of the sample to the leather bag.

This occupation engrossed all his attention for some time, and when he again raised his eyes the previous smile of satisfaction had been augmented by a glitter of greedy joy that lit his dark eyes.

“In luck’s way, Curtis Newnes—in luck’s way again!” he exclaimed to himself as he rubbed his hands together in an ecstasy of self-congratulation. “It seems that this is the chance for which you have been waiting all these years—the old treasure-trove of the Dacotahs! Ha! How well they hid their secret with the story of evil spirits that haunted the Serpent Valley! And yet the world has been idiotic enough all this time never to suspect the truth! Of course, it will be hard

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luck on that young fellow Munroe. But it's every man for himself in this world.

"Yes," the old man resumed after a brief pause; "times are changed since the old days in California. A little gold here; a little there while weighing or examining—yes, it mounted up nicely enough. But this! I wonder—how to get hold of it? H'm. It's difficult, but it can't be too difficult when you have only a tenderfoot to deal with. Let's think."

Again the assayer relapsed into thoughtfulness, and when he next stirred himself it was with the decided movement of a man whose mind has reached clear determination.

He put on his hat and passed into the outer office.

"Drever," he said, addressing the solitary clerk whom he possessed, "I am going to step round to the Land Office for a little while. If anyone calls you may say that I shall be back again shortly."

"Right, sir," replied the youth, whose official work at the moment consisted of chewing gum and devouring the contents of a volume that portrayed the lurid history of the James Brothers—the desperate road agents of fame dear to the hearts of many American youths.

"And I should give less time to rubbish of

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that sort," added Newnes, as he noted the cover of the book and acted up to the character which he sustained in Regina with such success. "A text-book on mineralogy would do you more good. Youths have gone to the penitentiary before this through reading trash of that description."

.

Curtis Newnes was well known in Regina.

He met a city merchant who was hurrying in his direction.

"Ah, Romaine!" he exclaimed genially. "Busy, as usual?"

"Very," said the merchant seriously. "I have just been trying to fix up that affair about the fire at Bluffs. Terrible thing—three families utterly destitute! Yes, that's about the size of it—absolutely destitute—no stocks, implements, nor house-roof."

"As bad as that?" questioned Newnes sympathetically. "As bad as that?"

"Mighty bad. Couldn't be worse, I reckon."

"Then, what about—what about a little timely assistance—a small subscription?"

"That's just it," the merchant returned eagerly. "That is just what I was going to see you about when I met you here. I am going to send out a couple of loads of clothes

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and food this evening. For the honour of the queen town of the prairie, we must fix these people up with all necessaries at once. Folks must not be allowed to suffer from want in the West, else what will they think in the Old Country of our hospitality to the stranger?"

"Exactly. That is well thought of, Romaine. Now, if you will allow me, I'll just put my name down for a couple of hundred dollars. Oh, that's all right! Must do the little we can—each one of us. I am glad to be able to be of a little service. And after all, what is the use of money if it does not help people who are in trouble? Well, good-bye for the present. I'll send round my cheque when I return to the office."

Leaving the delighted merchant, Newnes made his way to the Land Office, wherein is kept a record of all the land available for homesteading, as well as a register of all the deeds conveying right of possession to such as have fulfilled the legal requirements.

"Good afternoon, Tomlins!" he greeted the elderly clerk (an old friend) who came forward to attend to his needs.

"Afternoon, Newnes. Anything for you to-day?"

"I want to know about the land at Serpent Creek."

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"H'm." The clerk demurred for a few moments. "They know more about that at Saskatoon."

"Of course; of course. But this is not a formal application. A friend of mine thinks of taking up land in that quarter—why, goodness only knows. However, he has asked me to try and find out the prospects for him. He can apply to the office at Saskatoon later on if he decides to look up the locality."

"Well, it's very good land I am told," said Tomlins. "It is a bit out of the way; but it is practically free for selection."

"Not many settlers there, I take it?"

"Hardly any. There is a young fellow named Munroe. That's all I know at present. I happen to know about him because he has been discussing his land patent with one of our inspectors here to-day. It is quite an interesting point in land law. It seems that Munroe's three years for making the regulation improvements are nearly up. Of course, you know that if these improvements are not made according to regulations within the specified time, he can't get the deed for his land, and some other coon can step in and take it from him."

"The reward for laziness?" remarked Newnes, barely showing interest in the story.

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But Tomlins immediately refuted the suggestion.

"Not a bit of it! Munroe doesn't seem to be that sort. He has done improvements right enough—heaps of them—built a good dam in the Creek to irrigate the hay land, and things of that sort. The point is that he has not complied with the exact regulations according to the land law."

"I see. Rather hard on him."

"Mighty hard, though, of course, it is his own fault. His excuse is that he forgot the exact terms and just went on improving the property as he thought best."

"And when will his time be up?"

"Sometime in February."

"Then, he has six or eight weeks of autumn left?"

"I guess he'll manage it somehow. Now that he has had the chief's decision, no doubt he'll get a hustle on."

"No doubt. But about this friend of mine?"

"I should advise him to get into communication with the Saskatoon office."

"I'll tell him so," said Newnes. "But I may tell him that the land is well spoken about?"

"Oh, yes! There is no doubt that the land

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is good—best for mixed farming, I gather. Beyond that I am afraid that I am not able to give an opinion.”

“Thanks, very much.”

The assayer was about to move from the office when he paused to remark :

“Sad affair about that at the Bluffs. You heard about it, of course?”

“Yes!” Tomlins answered. “We were just talking about it when you came in.”

“Good!” returned Newnes with a kindly smile. “Then, your minds will be just ripe for further, more practical, talking. I met Romaine as I came along. He is taking up a subscription so as to send out two loads of the needful to-night. Get the boys of your department to pass round the hat! Every little helps, you know, in such a case.”

“I will,” answered Tomlins decidedly. “We must all do what we can in a time of misfortune.”

“That is what Romaine said,” was Newnes’ pleasant response. “Let us hope that the results will be as good as the intentions. Good afternoon!”

“Afternoon, Newnes.”

• • • • •
And the philanthropist was smiling to him.

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self as he passed out from the Land Office and reached the side-walk.

He was smiling because his thoughts were pleasant—very pleasant.

Oh, no! They had nothing to do with the disaster at the Bluffs. That was a matter that he had quickly dismissed from his mind. It is to be feared that philanthropy was a kind of business with Curtis Newnes. It earned him a good name, and averted eyes from many of his private dealings.

No! The smile was due to quite a different cause. Listen to the following remarks he made to himself and you will learn the reason for yourself :

“I wonder if Munroe *will* have completed his improvements by the time his limit is up?” Then a sinister smile came into the old man’s face to replace the previous expression, as he added :

“We shall see. . . . We shall see.”

CHAPTER II

DEVASTATION !

LEAVING the assayer's office Munroe had strolled along the side-walk in a thoughtful mood.

Several matters were troubling him. He had obtained the information for which he had come. In one case it was satisfactory. By hiring a "hand" at Saskatoon there was no reason why he should not comply with all the land regulations before winter set in. But he was not altogether satisfied with his interview in the assayer's office. To tell the truth, he did not trust the old man in spite of the latter's reputation. There had been too much of the "sorry to disappoint you, my boy," about the talk.

Nor could he tell exactly why he distrusted the man. Perhaps it was that when hopes are high one is often prone to doubt the authority of those who dash airy castles to the earth.

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Yet the fact remained that Jack pitted his own knowledge against that of the acknowledged expert. He determined to send a sample of the "dust" to England. Meantime, he would pursue his investigations during such time as was at his disposal. He did not yet forsake his dream of wealth.

Sauntering easily along, and enjoying the warm air of the afternoon, he slowly made his way back to the Maple House Hotel, where he had put up on alighting from the train that morning, and where he meant to stay until he returned by the north-bound express early the following morning.

He reached the hotel just as the supper (Western vernacular for "tea") bell was ringing. He had no friends in the house, so the meal was a fairly rapid one. Then he proceeded to kill time by walking round the town and later attending a concert.

It was not very late when he returned once more to his temporary home, but he judged that it was late enough for anyone to be out of bed who was timed to be at the railway depot the following morning at an hour when even ranchers are usually between the blankets.

On arrival he at once called the lift-boy to give him necessary instructions.

"You'll not forget to rouse me out in good

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time?" he concluded as he crossed the hall in the direction of the lift.

"That'll be all right, boss," replied the servant, with the easy manners of the West that knows no class distinction between grades of honest labour. "It's four a.m. sharp that you'll have to be out; so I guess three a.m. will just about fit it."

"Very good. Now I'll get aloft to bed."

"Like anything before you start in the morning?"

"A cup of coffee. That will be enough. I can have breakfast on the train at the usual hour. Good-night."

"Good-night, boss. I'll run you up in the lift."

But Munroe had barely set foot within the lift than an unusual phenomenon took place—that is to say, unusual for that latitude, and hitherto unknown to Regina.

It first took the form of a fierce blast of wind that suddenly dashed into the hall with such force that it swung wide the glass doors, bearing a thick cloud of dust, and sending the wicker hall-chairs scuttling into a corner like so many chickens huddling together at the presence of a fox.

A crash of breaking glass followed as one of the doors banged violently back again.

DEVASTATION!

“Gee-whiz!” exclaimed the lift-boy, as he hurried forward to close the heavier doors that abutted the street.

But the wind was an effective opposition to one man’s strength, and Munroe hastened to the servant’s aid.

At that moment the latter gave another exclamation that was partly amusement and partly fear.

“My hat! If that ain’t old Corry’s timber yard dancing down Fore Street all on its own!”

Jack looked outwards. Sure enough, in the light of the electric lamps, he could see a host of planks careering along the thoroughfare in a manner which was ludicrously suggestive of the servant’s simile. It seemed as though the entire yard had taken life and was indulging in some mad fandango.

But it was not time for thoughts of humour. Already several passers-by had been struck by the planks and were lying wounded in the road.

Jack sprang outwards to the side-walk. Instantly his ears were assailed by the terrible sound of many human voices screaming from direst fear and bodily pain.

The wind now shrieked with all the mad howling of the cyclone-fiend.

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Next followed the thunderous roar of falling masonry—a sound that rapidly came nearer, growing louder and more awesome as it approached.

Stunned at these sights and sounds Munroe could only stand and stare dumbly at the approaching riot of destruction. But he had little time to wait for, a moment later, one side of the street gaped open as though a giant plough had plunged its blade through the entire block of brick and stone.

Now the hurricane was present in all its fury. Every obstacle was picked up in unseen arms—trees wrenched from their roots, telephone poles pulled from their sockets, horses dashed against walls, men flung high in the air and then dropped limp and lifeless upon the hard road. Such were the sights that filled Munroe's horrified gaze in a mere flash of time. But it was only for a moment that his eyes were thus privileged. He, too, was but a frail opposition to the unseen hands. As a leaf is picked up and tossed by the frolic of an autumn breeze, so easily did the cyclone whirl this mortal victim in the air, only to release him when the reservoir beyond the city was reached. There, in grim humour, the tempest freed him. He was plunged among the debris of shattered houses. Then

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the wind passed onwards to spend its destroying fancy on the boundless prairie.¹

As the cold water closed over him, Jack struck out with the instinct of self-preservation. He was a good swimmer, so the impediments of clothes were no serious inconveniences. A few strong strokes brought him to the surface, by which time he had recovered his reasoning faculties sufficiently to consider the best means for safety.

The surface of the water was still disturbed and strewn with debris. Here and there in the darkness Jack thought that he could discern struggling figures—some clinging to spars; others beating the water frantically with helpless arms.

He looked towards the town. Here and there flames were leaping towards the sky, for fire was now doing her best to add to the destruction of one of the fairest cities of the prairie. For the most part, however, the city was in darkness, and the gaunt outlines of ruins were only visible where a background of fire was relief to the black silhouettes.

Drifting with the slight current of the lake (which is a large reservoir formed by a dam

¹ The actual date of the cyclone was 1912. The time has been predated a few months to suit this story. The circumstances, however, have been faithfully adhered to.—AUTHOR.

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thrown across a small valley) Munroe found a spar of wood which was sufficiently substantial to support him without the need for continued muscular effort. So, beyond a possible accident due to collision with other floating objects, the young rancher had reason to congratulate himself upon a comparative degree of good fortune. The water was cold, though not dangerously so. It was now only a matter of short time until, with the aid of his spar, he would be able to set foot on solid land again. After all, he thought to himself, the plight might have been much worse.

It was just when Jack was congratulating himself on the fact of his certain safety that, for the second time that night, he encountered real danger.

He had been floating calmly while he collected his scattered senses, when suddenly he was gripped from behind so unexpectedly that he was dragged backwards and almost lost hold of the friendly beam that had been supporting him.

"Let go, you idiot, whoever you are!" he exclaimed as his head came above water again.

Apparently his assailant was utterly bereft of senses, for instead of releasing his wild grip he made a frantic effort to clamber on the shoulders of the unfortunate modern Sinbad

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By this time the arms of the stranger were binding Jack's throat in a deadly embrace. In a few more minutes he felt that he would be obliged to release the friendly spar, in which event two struggling persons would sink to almost certain death.

"Can't you let go, you fool!" Jack cried, his temper quickly getting the upper hand of him. "I'll save you easily if you will only free my neck and stop struggling. If you won't—— Ugh!" The words were literally drowned in a choking gasp, for, at that crisis, the speaker was dragged beneath the water for the second time.

Then Jack "saw red." His brain was suddenly fired, and there was murder in his heart. It was not only the desire to save his own life that mastered him; it was also the mad impulse to kill the opposing force. Still under the water he released one hand from its grip on the wood. Then he doubled the arm, with all the force of which he was capable, and drove his right elbow backwards into the stomach of his assailant.

The effect was immediate. Instantly the clogging arms released their grip, while Jack—breathless and gasping—once again breathed the fresh air.

"A close shave that time!" was the

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thought that flashed through his brain as he realised that he was indeed safe.

A moment later came the horrible realisation of what he had done. He had meant to kill! Had he succeeded in that terrible intention?

He uttered a cry of pain—mental pain that is ever the sharpest of agonies.

“Oh, God! What have I done? What have I done—*again!*”

The saving spar was pushed from him. He dived back into the black depths in the direction where he believed the helpless body had sunk.

Down—down—down into inky darkness did Jack plunge—groping his way like a blind man or someone lost in the depths of the night.

He reached the slime at the bottom of the lake, and the few seconds that passed while he searched seemed to be like hours. He felt as though his chest would burst with the strain put upon it to retain every little remainder of air. There was a roaring in his ears as the sound of a thousand cataracts.

Unable to bear the effort any longer he bent his body for the ascent. It was then that his hands touched something more solid than mud, more tangible than water. At the very moment when he was forsaking the search he had succeeded. The very hope of the thought

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seemed to lend him another second of breath. Up! Up! Again the time dragged with weighted feet, while the water seemed to be as opaque as mud and the surface an interminable distance.

But the ordeal ended—just when most ordeals seem to end—at that time when we feel that the limit to our endurance has been reached. Munroe and his charge once more found the surface, and understood to the fullest the value of God's fresh air.

How Jack gulped the cool breeze! How he turned his face that the wind might fan his cheeks! It was nectar to the dying traveller in the desert; sudden freedom from the throttling grip of the cruellest torturer.

Lifeless floated the burden that he had risked so much to save.

Had he been too late?

That was the thought that came to Munroe as soon as he felt able to think clearly again.

Curiously enough, the rescuer did not question that it was indeed the body of him whom his anger had tried to slay, nor did he marvel at the long arm of chance that had enabled him to find the one for whom he sought, where there must have been many other unfortunates who had reached the depths of the lake without strength to fend for them-

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selves or fortune to send them a rescuer. It was, indeed, the long arm of chance.

But it was no similar deviation from the natural order of things that enabled Jack to find another trusty support to complete the work of rescue, scattered as the lake was with the results of the cyclone's sport. This second beam was a more substantial one than the forerunner, and it was not long before the rancher was steadily working his way towards the shore—supporting the unconscious body in the hollow of his right arm and pushing the beam before him with his left hand, while his legs struck out with the regular actions of self-control and effective swimming.

CHAPTER III

AFTER THE RESCUE

"WHY can't you let a fellow sleep in peace? It isn't time to get up yet. There's been no rising bell."

Jack sighed with relief as he stretched himself after a prolonged fight to restore life in the figure that was lying beside him on the grass. The rescuer's sustained exertions had brought the sweat out through every pore in his body. It was, therefore, a considerable relief to notice the first flutterings of heart-beats, and to be rewarded at last with the questions above quoted.

"That is better," the rancher said cheerfully. "How do you feel now?"

"Sleepy—very sleepy. And—and I do wish you—you fellows would stop—ragging a chap and——"

Then the speaker's eyes opened. "Where am I?" he questioned. "This doesn't seem to be the dormitory, yet——"

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“No!” laughed Jack. “I guess you are a little out of your reckoning if you think you are in any place so comfortable. Still, there *are* less comfortable places to rest upon than this self-same grass. That lake, for example.”

“Yes, I remember now,” said the prostrate youth—a boy about sixteen years of age; he could not have been more—“I remember leaving the hotel. I wanted to see the town by night—my first night in the West. And then—well, I’m not quite clear about the rest of it at all. Everything seemed suddenly to go off in a whirl. There was wind, and water, and—then I thought that I was drowning. Yes, I am sure that I was drowning—and”—the voice became stronger—“I suppose—no, I am certain that you saved my life, else how should I be here?”

“Don’t worry about that,” was the light response. “I dare say I had a little to do with the business, for we were both in the same plight together. But you are getting on all right now. How do you feel?”

“Better——”

“Well enough to struggle back to town—at least, to what is left of it? There has been a ghastly cyclone. As far as I can gather it has ploughed a path right through the centre

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of the city. Do you think you can walk a bit if you lean on me?"

"Oh, yes! I'll be able to manage in a few minutes now. I feel a bit winded; but that will soon pass off."

"Where are you putting up?"

"At the Homesteader—a sort of hotel boarding-house."

"Well, the sooner we find it the better for ourselves," returned Munroe. "I am staying at the Maple House. Now, see if you can manage to get on your feet, old man. You can hang on to me. How's that? A bit shaky still?"

"A little—not much," replied the younger boy. "If I may just hold on for a little longer until I get used to it. I am afraid that I am a beastly nuisance."

"Nonsense," rejoined Munroe kindly. "I am as fit as a fiddle. Always was. Nothing ever knocked me out at school, and I am in better form now than ever I was then. So just put as much weight on me as ever you like, and we'll go scouting for the Homesteader."

Walking slowly at first, though soon gaining strength and confidence, the younger lad re-entered the mutilated town at the guidance of his friend in adversity.

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It was a doleful picture that the youths encountered. On all sides were the ruins of public buildings and private houses. Here and there a fire was blazing or smouldering, and in some places figures could be seen moving in the firelight looking for friends and relatives or property.

Encountering a policeman on patrol, Munroe asked the direction of the Homesteader.

The constable pointed to a heap of masonry that was enveloped in sheets of flame.

"Over there!" he answered grimly.

Jack's companion gasped.

"You mean——"

"Charred wood and stone will be all that you will see of the Homesteader or its belongings by the morning."

"And the people?" questioned the boy in horror, as he understood how near he had possibly been to a death in torture. "The people who were staying at the hotel?"

"Saved—by a merciful providence. They are putting up at the Windsor, all except one—a boy—a young fellow just out from the Old Country."

"I was staying there. I have just come West. So, if there is only one missing——"

"You'll be that one and no mistake about it!" completed the officer with satisfaction.

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“Well, that’s good. You’d better go down to the Windsor and let them know.”

“What about the Maple House?” Jack questioned.

“Right as a castle. The cyclone passed it by.”

“Then, we’ll go there,” was the elder boy’s decision. “We can be sure of grub and rest at the Maple House without bothering the people at the Windsor. Besides”—this to his companion—“you’ll want peace to make your plans, not to speak of dry clothes and a rest.”

“But my clothes—my box!” ejaculated the lad. He had hardly grasped yet what the disaster really meant.

For answer the policeman glanced significantly towards the glowing embers of the Homesteader, and the boy returned in agitation:

“But it is all that I have got in the world! My money—everything was there!”

Munroe took his companion’s arm with a friendly action.

“Come, old chap,” he said. “We’ve got to face things and be thankful that they are not much worse. Trust yourself to me for a time. I have been out West for nearly three years and I know the ropes a bit.”

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“That’s the way to talk!” said the constable approvingly. “Misfortunes can’t be helped. We’ve just got to look them straight in the face and fight our way in spite of them. As for the loss of money—well, there’s scores of men in the West who came out with just what you’ve got now—the clothes on their backs. To-day, they could buy a dozen of the best sections if they had the mind, and then not miss the dollars. Now, you just take your friend’s advice, younker. I’ll go round by the Windsor and set their minds at rest about you.”

From the reassuring counsel of his two advisers the boy at last began to take heart. He was not without courage; but, after all, when one is only sixteen it is not easy to be a philosopher while knowing that all one’s wordly belongings have vanished in smoke and ashes.

But the touch of a friendly arm and the sound of a friendly voice are valuable assets in time of trouble. This boy was rich in both possessions, and his pluck quickly rendered him fit to take advantage of his privileges.

Saying “good-night” to the patrol, the two new friends moved on with the constable’s “Good luck to you” ringing in their ears,

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“Don’t think me an awful funk,” said the younger of the two. “At first, it knocked me over to think that I had lost everything. But, of course, I see now that it can’t be helped. I have just got to make the best of things as they are. You don’t think me ungrateful for what you’ve done, do you?”

Jack recalled bitterly the temporary madness that had seized him in the water. It seemed the heaping of coals of fire on his head to hear his companion speak of gratitude. It would take many years of faithful service, he thought, to counterbalance that night’s tragedy—for, of course, it is always a tragedy in a life when the wish to slay enters the heart for even a moment. He could not at that time explain to his companion what his thoughts were. Nevertheless, his mind was made up. He had already determined that such as he possessed should now be shared by him whose life had been nearly forfeited by a besetting sin—an ungovernable temper. And he had been priding himself for some time in the thought that he had at last gained the mastery over self. It was humiliating to realise his defeat.

“You mustn’t talk of gratitude to me,” he said quietly. “You do not understand what I owe to *you*.” Then he added, with an effort

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to attain a more cheerful strain: "Besides, I take it we are both from the Old Country, and both rather friendless. There is not so very much difference in our ages either. I am just over twenty, and you——"

"Sixteen."

"Well, twenty and sixteen shall lay their heads together and help one another. So we'll say no more under that heading until we have had grub, rest, and a good airing at the Maple House."

But the stirring events of that night were not yet over as far as our two heroes were concerned.

While passing the ruined part of the town, where a house was a glowing ruin within ragged walls, the boys were arrested by a stifled scream coming from behind some masonry at the opposite side of the road.

"What is that?" the younger boy exclaimed in a startled voice, and at the same moment the cry was repeated, though, this time, it sounded more choking and muffled.

Munroe did not pause to answer the question with idle conjectures. He dashed across the road and rounded a corner of the ruin, being quickly followed by his companion, to whose nerves this fresh excitement had proved a most effective restorative.

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The cause of the cry was at once apparent. Two people were struggling together—one, a woman ; the other, an immense Indian—a half-civilised pariah—who had gripped the woman from behind and was trying to stifle her cries with one hand while he roughly twisted a string of jewels from her neck with the other.

With an exclamation of anger, Jack sprang forward, and a healthy right-hander placed beneath the redskin's ear caused the assailant to release his grip with remarkable suddenness.

For an instant the Indian faced his attacker, and in the glare of the burning building the boys saw one of the most handsome faces and massive bodies that they had ever seen. It seemed almost incredible that such a noble specimen of red manhood could be an ordinary robber—a low looter from the victims of misfortune. Nevertheless, such was the case, for the Indian held a diamond necklace in his hand, and before time allowed for further action he sprang among the ruins and disappeared from sight.

Jack was for following the fugitive, but the lady prevented him.

“No, no !” she said, gasping as she recovered her breath. “It does not matter. Don't try to follow him !”

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"But he has stolen your necklace!" exclaimed Jack, all eager to follow the fray.

"Never mind. What do a few diamonds matter compared to your life? I know that man. Shontayeega is his name. He is a desperate character and would stick at nothing. But I should have thought that he would have respected me."

"Or any lady," added the younger of the two boys.

"He is not an ordinary Indian," said the lady apologetically. "You must not judge the others by him. He is a Chippeway—chief's brother; but an outcast from his people. No, don't judge the others by him."

"I hope you are not hurt?" questioned Munroe.

"Not in the least," was the satisfying reply. "Great White Medicine is not so frail as all that. But I am forgetting; you do not know me. I am Mrs Rothwell—a doctor. I work only among the Indians, and they have given me the name of Great White Medicine. And I think that they love me. That is why I was so taken aback when that man attacked me. I never dreamed of it when I met him."

"I only wish that you would let me follow the brute!" said Jack fiercely under his breath.

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"But I forbid you," returned the doctor with a pleasant smile. "You don't know that man's ways. A stone flung from behind—and from the shelter of the darkness—that is Little Wolf's way of fighting. No, believe me, it does not matter. But I must thank you both for your timely assistance."

"You will let us see you safely to your home?" interrupted Jack tactfully.

"Home!" she repeated. "Why, this is my home—this heap of stones—this broken wall—these smoking beams! Is it not a beautiful home?"

"I am sorry," said Munroe sympathetically, but the lady returned quite unconcernedly:

"Oh, don't pity me! I have not lived long enough in it to become attached. It was only the other day that I was saying to my husband that I would not shed a tear if the whole place became a dust-heap. And now you see the result! It serves me right. Fortunately none of the servants were staying there. My husband and I have been visiting in the States. I was not expected to return so soon, so I have been living at the Lansdowne until the house was cleaned. I was at dinner when the disaster took place."

"Was it not a risk to come out alone at this

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time of the night—or rather, morning? ” interposed Jack.

“ Having no escort, my husband being still in Chicago, I had no choice. But you have not told me to whom I am indebted for my life? ”

“ My name is John Munroe. But you must not speak of being indebted. ”

“ Nor shall I—again. A brave man’s best reward is to *know* that he has done his duty. If he cares to add to that the gaining of a friend—well, I, at least, shall be glad. ”

“ But not so glad as I, ” was the gallant rejoinder.

“ Very nicely said, ” the doctor remarked, cheerful in spite of her double loss that night.

“ But you have not introduced your friend yet? ”

“ My name is Fred Holmes. ”

“ *Fred what?* ” exclaimed Jack with a start, as though the words had been pistol shots.

“ What did you say? ”

“ Fred Holmes. But what’s the matter? ”

“ Oh, nothing—nothing, ” returned Munroe uneasily. “ Only I—I knew a fellow of that name—or, at least, something like it—once. That’s all. And—and—but we are keeping Mrs Rothwell from her hotel. Let us see you safely to the Lansdowne, Mrs Rothwell, and

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then my friend and I will go on to the Maple House."

"Thank you," was the gracious reply. "It is not far. You will not forget what I have told you? I shall always be glad to be of service to you in any way— to you and your friend. By the way, you must be quite new friends since the one did not know the name of the other? "

"We met for the first time together—in the middle of the reservoir," explained Jack with grim humour. But Mrs Rothwell rightly understood the circumstances as an accident due to the cyclone.

"Such a meeting means friends for life——"

"He saved mine, just as he saved yours!" broke in Holmes with excited admiration.

"Rot!" was the rough rejoinder. "If you talk like that again I'll throw you back to where I found you!"

CHAPTER IV

A FRIEND IN NEED

"WELL, that feels better, doesn't it?" questioned Jack some hours later, as he tilted his chair to a comfortable angle and looked pleasantly at his companion, who was sitting at the opposite side of the table. "A good sleep, clothes dried, a hospitable hotel manager who gives us a parlour to ourselves, a jolly good dinner—the world seems quite a different place from what it was a few hours ago."

"Rather!" returned Fred, with no pretence at anything else but enjoyment. "The only part of it that bothers me is that it can only last for a short while." Then he added quickly, "And it has to be paid for—with someone else's money."

"Then, I shouldn't worry, if that is all you have to trouble you," was the response. "We'll have a general balance up—some day,

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Now, what about your plans? Have you thought of anything?"

Holmes shook his head.

"I am afraid I have been too muddle-headed to think of anything sensible. But it ought not to be difficult. A fellow who has had all his property converted into ashes—he ought to have little enough trouble in deciding upon the next move."

"Which is?"

"To find work."

"Not so easy at this time of the year. In the spring you would have had no difficulty. There are heaps of farmers only too anxious to get hold of likely looking chaps. It is a little different now with the winter not so far off. What were your ideas in coming out?"

"To get a job on a ranch—something small, of course—to begin with."

"Got any friends?"

"Not in Canada."

"But I suppose you can get help from home if you need it?"

Fred's face shadowed at the suggestion.

"No," he answered seriously. "You see, my people are not very well off—now. It was different once. But I've got an invalid brother at home. He has been like it for nearly three years; had an accident at school—at footer,

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and had to come home. The doctors say that he will be helpless all his life. He is older than me. I was at a preparatory school at the time the accident happened. It was intended that I should go to the same school later on, but when the affair took place, and the doctors said that my brother would never be able to do any work for himself—well, of course, I couldn't hope to go to a public school. The pater would need to save all he could for my brother to live on."

"I see," interpolated Jack quietly at the pause. "So you had to give up the thought of going to a public school. Rather rough luck."

"Oh, I didn't mind that," answered Holmes, with a brave show of carelessness of what became of himself. "I went to a decent enough day school. It wasn't half bad. But during the last year or two I began to notice things at home. I suppose when a fellow is a kid it isn't in him to see things properly. He doesn't notice how his people have to pinch and scrape sometimes to make ends meet. But I've been seeing things for some time. I began to notice that the mater didn't have as many new dresses as she used to have; how the pater took 'buses instead of taxis; and how my brother and I

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used to have extra nice things to eat sometimes while the other people would sham that they were not hungry. So, last winter, I made up my mind that I couldn't stick it any longer. I felt so beastly mean, seeing a great chap like me doing nothing to make things easier. So I begged the dad to let me try my luck out West. I know that he scraped up every penny he could find to give me a decent outfit, and—well, I'd be a cad to ask him to help me again, knowing what a pull it has been already."

While Fred had been rattling off this story in his usual brisk manner, it might have been noticed that Jack's face had been gradually becoming more grave, and his eyes were lowered so as not to meet the eyes of the speaker. But beyond tapping absently with a knife on the edge of a plate, he did not indicate any other sign but that of mere attention, not attempting to interrupt the tale. As the younger boy finished, however, he remarked with quiet evenness, though still without raising his eyes :

"And this brother? Does he—does he suffer much—bodily pain, I mean?"

Holmes instinctively shuddered at the question.

"Terrible, sometimes!" he said. "It is his spine, you see. The headaches that he

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gets often last for days on end. Poor old Cyril! It is awful to think what he has to go through."

"Yes; I dare say."

"But he never complains. He never says a word. Sometimes I've seen him lying there with his hands pressed tight to his head and the sweat pouring down his face. But I never heard him complain or say a single word against the cad who did it all."

"The cad?" repeated Munroe in a dull tone.

"Yes! A fellow named Murdoch had his knife into Cyril for something, and he purposely fouled him in a house match. Everybody could see that it was intentional. He was drummed out of the school as he deserved; but if ever I meet the beggar, and have the chance, I'll make him pay the full price if I have to go to prison for it!"

So bitter were Fred's words, and so excited was he at the memory of his brother's wrongs, that his face flushed with anger and his eyes flashed as he registered this vow of vengeance.

Still Munroe sat immovable—an attitude that Fred would have certainly remarked upon had he not been so carried away by his feelings.

"Yes," he added; "no punishment *can* be too much for a cad of that sort. He meant to kill my brother. I am as certain of that as I

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am certain that I am sitting here at this moment."

At last Jack turned so as to face the angry lad.

"I don't think that I would say that, if I were you," he said in serious tones. "The—the other fellow may have lost his temper——"

"And lamed for life the best brother who ever lived!"

"Perhaps. But it seems a little hard to say that he meant to kill him. A fit of temper is one thing. It is quite another thing to—deliberately plan a deed—such as you say."

"It was *planned*!" Fred stoutly defended. "He went out of his way to do it. But just let me meet him. That's all I want!"

"You do not intend ever to forgive him?"

Fred gasped with astonishment at the suggestion.

"Forgive him? Why on earth should I?"

"Perhaps the poor chap has had something to bear in the way of punishment. You say that he was kicked out of school. That must have been hard enough for any decent chap——"

"For any *decent* chap, yes," retorted Fred, with bitter sarcasm. "Murdoch was not a decent chap. Nothing was bad enough for him."

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"Still," pursued Jack, "I think I can imagine that even the worst of us are able to feel remorse. His life must be terrible to him now, knowing what he has done."

"Not half as terrible as Cyril's is to him," was the other's stubborn retort. "I'd just like to see him try a bit of it."

Jack rose from his chair with a forced smile on his face, and stretched himself as he crossed the room to look out from the window.

"Well, well. Let us hope that you never meet this fellow—Murdoch, I think you called him—for his sake. But this brings us no nearer the solution of your future. Now, while you have been talking, I have been thinking over a plan that you might like. 'At any rate, it might be useful until you had time to look about you and settle something better. It is this: I have a ranch about a hundred and forty miles to nowhere—forty miles north of Saskatoon, which is about a hundred miles from here, to be more exact. I call the place 'Nowhere' because it really is in an out-of-the-way section—quite wild country, where I have a human visitor once in a blue moon. There is a passably good shanty, a fair lot of stock, and a few cultivated acres. How does that strike you for a temporary doss? "

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“You mean that I could go and stay with you?” asked Fred eagerly. His temporary depression had been quickly dispelled by Jack’s business-like manner and proposition. Even the prospect of wildness and possible hardships only served to whet his enthusiasm. “You ask me to work for you?”

“If you think you could stand it. I only ride into Saskatoon for the mail once a fortnight, you know. But, of course, it need only be for a time, as an experiment. There would be no need to make it permanent if you felt bored.”

“Why, I should like it immensely if you really mean it?”

“Of course I mean it.”

“It’s awfully good of you.”

“Not in the least. To tell the truth, it is awfully selfish of me. ‘Nowhere’ is apt to be a bit lonely at times, and I would be really glad to have a chap like you to keep me company—a fellow who wouldn’t expect to have too soft a time of it all at once—too fine a bed, and all that sort of thing.”

“Give me a plank. That will content me for the time being,” returned the delighted Holmes. “I want to make a home out here so that my people can come out in a few years’ time—where Cyril can have plenty of fresh

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air and all the things he needs without seeing the pater and mater going without the things they need as well. For that, I don't care what the start is—where I sleep——”

“Even supposing that you were asked to share the roof one day with the hated Murdoch?” questioned Jack with a forced laugh, as he turned aside again.

Instantly all the eagerness faded from Fred Holmes' face.

“Please, don't joke on that subject,” he said. “I would rather starve in the cold than take any benefit from that hound. And my people would think the same as I do. But don't let us talk of such an impossibility. It takes all the shine out of things somehow.”

“Right you are, old boy, I won't, if it hurts you. Thoughtless of me. But, talking of your people, don't you think we ought to send them a message of some sort? They are sure to see an account of the cyclone in the evening papers, and they'll be anxious, knowing that Regina was to be your destination.”

“My word! You are right!” exclaimed the younger boy as he jumped from his chair—all eagerness to relieve his parents' anxiety at once. “What a brick you are, Munroe! You think of everything.”

But the boy's eagerness was short-lived.

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He recalled how he was utterly without means to send a telegram at the rate of something near to one shilling a word.

But Jack readily divined his friend's thoughts, and tactfully offered the solution of the difficulty.

"If you'll just make yourself comfortable here for a time, I'll go down to the depot and send the cable. I have some other business down there that I can do at the same time."

"Would it not be as well if I came with you?"

"Better not," said Jack considerately. "You need all the rest that you can get. You'll have a long journey to-morrow, and then a forty-mile drive to follow. I'd take all the rest that I could get, if I were you. Now, about this wire? What do you want to say?"

"I'd like to make things look as bright as possible——"

"Of course," was the brisk interruption. "It is no use making other people miserable because things happen to have gone a bit wrong with ourselves."

"That is just what I think. There is no use whining about my lost outfit, or anything of that sort. How would something like this

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do: '*Had fun with cyclone—met friend—prospects A1*' ?”

“Just the very ticket!” was Munroe’s opinion. “When they read that, their minds will be at ease immediately.”

“But then”—Holmes resumed hesitatingly—“What about—well—I don’t see where the money is to come from for this and—and—the railway fare to-morrow.”

Jack wrinkled his brow and did his best to look as though he were giving serious consideration to this new problem, although he had already settled the matter beforehand to his own satisfaction.

“H’m. That is a difficulty now that you come to speak of it. All your money was lost in the fire?”

“All except about a dollar in silver in my pocket. I locked up all that I had before I went out last night, thinking that it would be safer in a trunk than in my pocket.”

“Not reckoning on a cyclone, which is twenty times worse than the worst of thieves.”

“So I don’t quite see what is to be done.”

Jack hummed quietly to himself for a few moments.

“It is a bit of a puzzle,” he said. “Cables can’t be sent on tick, nor can railway

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fares be obtained in exchange for the most honest smiles. I know! I'll stand the damage and consider it as an advance on account of wages!"

"Wages?" repeated Fred, somewhat mystified.

"Why, certainly. You don't suppose that you are going to work for nothing?"

"Well, I thought that for the time at least——"

"Certainly. 'For the time,' " was the interruption. "For a little time I know that you won't be of much use—not worth more than your bread. But you'll soon pick up the hang of things, and then you will be worth considerable. Of course, when I spoke of 'wages,' I used the wrong word. I am not yet in so flourishing a condition that I can afford to pay for help. What I propose is that you shall do your share of the work and take a share of the profits. Now, don't begin setting up difficulties! I have already told you that, in all probability, you won't be able to stand it for a week."

"Then, where does the question of profits come in?" questioned Fred with a laugh.

"As plain as a pikestaff," was the retort. "If I advance you some of the profits, you'll *have* to stay with me whether you like it or

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not until you have worked off the debt. See? ”

“ I see,” answered Fred. “ But I think I see also that you are only making excuses so as to lend me money. But I’ll pay you back. I don’t know how, but——”

“ Shall I tell you how? ”

Munroe asked the question with sudden seriousness as he stepped forward and laid a hand on the younger boy’s shoulder, looking steadily into his eyes the while.

“ Shall I tell you how? ” he repeated. “ You can pay me back by working your very hardest to make a good home in the West for those in the Old Country, and—by trying—not to think too hardly of that—that—fellow—Murdoch. Real men learn how to forgive as well as how to punish.”

Fred slightly bent his head before the direct gaze of his companion.

“ The one thing I can easily promise,” he said under his breath, “ but the other—I can’t do that, Munroe, because I hate his very name.”

“ But you might try? Perhaps he is suffering more than you imagine.”

“ Not he! A beast of that sort wouldn’t suffer so long as he is free. But I wonder at a decent fellow like you, Munroe, taking the

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side of a cad like Murdoch. Surely, you don't think that he ought to be let off?"

Jack let his hand drop loosely from his friend's shoulder.

"I do not take his side, old chap. But I think I can imagine what the worst of fellows would feel if he had done what you say Murdoch did. Unless he was a devil, I think he must be unhappy. I think I could be sorry for even such a fellow as he."

"Even if it was your own brother who had been lamed for life?"

"Yes; even—my own—brother," Jack said solemnly. Then, with a sudden change of demeanour—"Well, I'll be off to see about that telegram. Give me the address of your people, and it won't be our fault if they don't have news of you in a couple of hours or less. What is it? 'Holmes—14 Hakon Street—Sheringdon Lea'? Right. So long, old man. I'll not be away longer than I can help."

CHAPTER V

FRIENDS FOR AN HOUR

LEFT for a time to his own devices, Holmes sat by the window of the hotel parlour from which he could obtain an excellent view of the street.

At no great distance he could see a great gap in the continuity of buildings. That was where the hurricane had ploughed its way. Not having been subjected to the completing destructiveness of fire, the ruins were but a seeming heap of masonry from which jutted beams of iron and wood. At that time, many persons were engaged trying to recover such property as might be worth salving.

It was a matter for general rejoicing that the number of human casualties was found to be less than had been anticipated and dreaded. There had been many accidents due to falling buildings and the force of the hurricane which had thrown people like shuttles from place to

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place. But the death-roll was comparatively slight. It was Regina's first visitation of the kind. Let us hope that she will never have another such unwelcome guest.

In comparison with these evidences of destruction, Fred was interested by the more peaceful commonplace incidents of the street such as are peculiar to most western towns.

In addition to being the day following a terrible devastation, it also happened to be the day of the usual weekly market. The living must be fed, even while the dead are being laid to rest; so business was being conducted in the market square just as it had been each week since Regina became a well-ordered town.

Fred was greatly interested in the wagons that passed slowly in front of the hotel, being drawn along in a meandering sort of way by a team of oxen that chewed the cud contentedly as they rolled along at their steady, sluggish pace. Now and then a cowboy in leather "shaps," and wearing a hat like a wheel, came cantering past with the listless, easy action of a man who is as much at home in the saddle as in an arm-chair. A few Indians passed along the side-walk. They did not appear as the wild, painted and much-feathered heroes of a Fenimore Cooper romance and cinema

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picture. To all outward seeming they were a sort of hybrid production. Trousers of the East had replaced the old deer-skin leggings of the West, and there was an obvious suggestion of a draper's shop about the shirts they wore. But the feet still preferred moccasins; an occasional feather and many beads still decorated hair and neck; yellow ochre still tinted the forehead with a broad band; and, without exception, an ample blanket was the outer covering that cloaked a multitude of peculiarities.

While Holmes was enjoying the novelty of such scenes, and letting the afternoon slip away in pleasant reverie, he was interrupted by the entrance of the "boots," who was carrying two or three folded papers in his hand.

"Boss gone out?" he questioned briefly, as he took a quick glance round the room.

"Yes. He has gone to the railway station. He won't be long. Do you want him?"

"Not particular. Thought he'd want to have these letters. Cook found them inside the fender. Guess they must have been left in his pockets when he sent the things to dry, and then they got dropped out."

"Thanks," said Holmes, reaching to take

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the documents. "I'll give them to my friend when he comes back."

"Right you are," said the servant. "Don't suppose they're love letters or he'd be more mindful of them!" And having uttered this remarkable witticism the speaker left the room.

Fred glanced at the papers. They were apparently all letters bereft of their covers.

The boy threw the little bundle on to the table near by, but in transit one letter separated from the others and fell upon the floor. Holmes stooped lazily to pick it up. It was an envelope, stamped and addressed for posting.

"I imagine that letter will need to be re-written before anyone can read it," the boy remarked to himself with a laugh, as he noted how the ink had run to an almost indecipherable blur.

That was one moment. The next—he dropped the letter as if it had been red-hot metal, and he started up from his chair with a cry of pain.

There was a frightened, dazed look on Fred's face. He stared straight in front of him for a few seconds while he rallied his thoughts. Then he uttered an expression of contempt for himself, saying aloud :

"What a fool I am! It is impossible. I

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must have been dreaming. It can't be the same! "

He picked up the envelope and turned it towards the light of the window, while he bent close to distinguish the letters beneath the smudge of ink. And his face was perplexed and serious as he repeated aloud :

"Mrs Murdoch, The Towers, Sheringdon Lea."

A moment later the boy tore off the covering and opened the sheets. It was wrong of him, no doubt ; but his nerves were too disturbed and his horrible suspicions too overmastering to leave room for scruples.

"*Dearest Mother,*" he read. Rapidly he turned the sheets to find the signature. "*Ever your affectionate son, Jack,*" was the conclusion. Then Holmes resigned himself to a paroxysm of temper.

"Oh, the beast ! To cheat me like that when I was trusting him all the time ! And he must have known perfectly well that I was Cyril's brother. That is why he made me tell the story—he wanted to gloat over it, the brute ! And all that jaw about 'forgiveness' ! Forgiveness—Munroe or Murdoch, or whatever you call yourself ? Forgive you ? I'd sooner beg in the streets than forgive such a mean cad as you are ! "

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The boy was almost beside himself with fury. He tore Jack's letter in pieces and scattered the fragments over the floor. It did not occur to him at the time to recall that he owed his life to that very "cad." Temper does not leave much room for gratitude or reason. All that he realised at the moment was that he had shaken hands with his avowed enemy; that he had eaten food at the same table; that he had accepted gifts from his hands. It was gall to his pride and fuel to his anger to know that he had ever exchanged a single word of friendship with such a monster.

What was he to do?

His first thoughts were to wait for Jack's return and throw back his friendship in his teeth. Then, out from his great hatred came the feeling that he could not bear to look again on the face of the young rancher. Anxious though he had been but a little time since to speak his mind, now came a feeling of utter loathing. He must get away at once; he must put distance between himself and the enemy he had so long hungered to meet.

It is often thus with us. That which we most desire to-day is that which we are most anxious to avoid when the morrow brings the prospect of meeting. Fred's hatred had taken

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the form of aversion; so, without pausing to consider the fors and againsts, he hastened to put into action the bidding of reckless impulse.

Carefully gathering Munroe's papers into a little heap, he placed them on one end of the table which occupied the centre of the room. In front of these he laid the empty envelope which had been the cause of this sudden change in his prospects. Next he counted the money in his pockets. It amounted to one dollar and fifteen cents. This he piled neatly on the top of the envelope, after doing which he scribbled on a piece of the hotel note-paper the following message :

“To Jack Murdoch, late cad of Sheringdon College.—This is all the money I have. It will pay for a small part of the telegram. I promise faithfully to pay you every penny that I owe you as soon as ever I can.

“FRED HOLMES

“(Cyril's brother).”

It is to be feared that, when we read these words after the lapse of time since they were written, we are rather inclined to smile at the writer's conduct. There was just a slight suggestion of the blood-and-thunder about the tone of the defiant document. But we must

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not forget that Holmes was a highly excitable boy. Moreover, he was intensely loyal. Affection for his injured brother and hatred for the injurer had combined considerably to warp his mind from any calm reasoning on this matter. So he carried out the plans that came first to his mind. He placed the scribbled note where it would be readily seen, then picked up his hat and hastened from the room and from the hotel.

Reaching the street, Fred took the first turning that led from the main thoroughfare. Without any other thought but to leave behind him the prairie town and the hated presence which it contained, the boy pressed onwards. He crossed to the north side of the C.P.R. track, passed the outlying houses and the great flour-mill. Northwards he trudged the steady incline of the trail until, at last, he reached the more open prairie that was only broken here and there by scattered homesteads.

Presently the path took a downward slope. Fred looked behind, and he sighed with relief when he saw that Regina was hidden from view.

Although the afternoon was quickly passing the sun was still hot. From three o'clock to five are often very warm hours on the prairie, and the heat poured down upon the youthful tramp. [To one on a forced march the heat

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was semi-tropical. Already the boy's boots were coated with dust, and his clothes were sticking to his body with the clammy ooze of perspiration.

Still Holmes did not slacken his pace. He had no eyes for the gorgeous carpet of green so thickly decked with dwarf roses and crimson lilies. He had no ears for the lark that sprang from the bunch-grass and darted straight into the blue sky to fling a song to the sun. His brain was obsessed with the one thought "Onward!" He did not realise that he was in the least degree hot and tired until, at a sudden dip of the meadow, he saw beneath him a little verdant valley where twined a silver thread of water between fringes of red and grey willow.

To avoid the neighbouring farms, Fred now left the trail and made a detour to reach the bed of the valley. Once there, he pushed his way through the bush, dropped on his knees beside the water, then alternately drank refreshment and bathed his face and hands in the welcome coolness.

It was a spot well sheltered from the rays of the sun. He would rest for a time, he thought, until the heat of the day had passed. Meantime, he could consider his position and determine what steps to take next.

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Then he slept. He was not aware of feeling drowsy. Sleep just crept upon him with silent feet, touched his eyes with magic fingers, and trouble was instantly banished to oblivion.

CHAPTER VI

PLOTTERS !

WHEN Holmes next became conscious of his surroundings, it was night. A gentle breeze laden with aromatic fragrance culled on its journey over the prairie was softly stirring the wands of willows that formed his bower. The air was filled with the trillings of a thousand crickets and the croakings of frog legions. At intervals came the siren shriek of the night-hawk as he swooped down from the stars with stiffened wings, under-curved the better to cleave the air.

Fred sat up and rubbed his eyes, wondering where he was, for his sleep had been the deep sleep of exhaustion from which one does not awaken too readily.

Then he remembered. He realised that he was homeless and portionless—a tiny solitary speck of humanity cast upon the face of the vast prairie, something less friendless and less

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provided for than the birds that disturbed the night with the weird harshness of their screaming.

What was he to do?

He stood up. He was stiff from the strained position in which he had been lying these past hours. Otherwise he was refreshed and ready for action.

But he was also hungry. Unfortunately there were no means at hand whereby the needs of the stomach might be satisfied. There were lights flickering from farms at no great distance, but he felt that he could not go to one of these as a beggar of the night. He would wait until morning, and then he would seek them as one who looks for work.

As Fred stood in indecision his attention was diverted from the affairs of self to the affairs of another in the form of a horse that was stepping briskly in the direction of the clump of willows. As the sound came nearer Fred was soon able to discern the figure of a rider, and he was just in the act of pushing his way through the bushes and making his presence known when the horseman stopped, uttered a low whistle three times, and then dismounted from his steed.

The circumstances were not a little mystifying. They were still more mysterious when,

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out from the bush and not more than six or seven yards from where Holmes was concealed, came an immediate answer to the whistle in the same form.

Then Fred decided to remain where he was for the present. He rightly conjectured that persons who take all the trouble to hold meetings at such remote spots and to announce their presence by secret signals—these are not the persons who are likely to relish the presence of strangers. All the evidences of planned privacy were present. It might be a little awkward for him who came uninvited.

Although the rider wore a flowing cloak and a wide felt hat, even in the starlight Holmes readily distinguished the outlines of a man of breeding. And even though the clothes indicated the distinction of class, the boy did not for an instant associate the night wanderer with any of cowboy or ranch rank. Of course, he had had practically no experience of either. But instinct told him what was actually the fact, for the newcomer was indeed none else than Curtis Newnes, with whom we have already had a little acquaintance.

“Shontayeega!” the man called softly.

“Little Wolf is here,” answered a deep voice in English from out the bush. Then followed a rattling sound of willow wands being parted

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and springing back again, after which Fred saw the dark outline of a man emerging from among the trees.

At first this second figure was rather indistinct as seen among the branches of vegetation. But gradually the clear lines of profile became more distinct until, stepping quite clear of the bush, there was revealed the form of an Indian wrapped in a blanket.

And Holmes knew the figure. It was that of the looter of ruined houses—the thief who would have strangled a woman for the sake of a string of jewels. Shontayeega was the renegade Chippeway whom Munroe's strong arm had put to flight by the ruins of Mrs Rothwell's home.

Fred was not allowed much time for speculations, for the rider had immediately addressed the Indian on the latter's appearance.

"Glad to see that you keep appointments so well! How did you get on last night?"

"Good—good!" was the fawning reply.

"Jewellery?" the old man asked sharply.

"Many pretty stones; many stones that shine like stars. Shontayeega work well."

"H'm. We'll see. Let me have a look at the result. I'll tell you then whether or not you have made the most of your time."

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The Indian shook open the blanket robe, plunged a hand into the front of his shirt, and took out a small bundle which tinkled musically as the dark fingers grasped it.

The redskin was slow—at least, he was too slow for the patience of his companion, who snatched the bundle from his hand and tore open the fastening.

Then it seemed to Fred's awestruck sight that the white man held a heap of stars on his open palm. What the jewels were he could not tell from that distance, but, whatever the gems might have been, the sight was evidently satisfying to the greed of the holder, judging by the gasp of satisfaction that escaped from his lips.

"Have Shontayeega done good work?" was the Indian's eager question.

Newnes gave a slight grunt of satisfaction.

"It was a good idea of mine to send you out exploring after the cyclone had shown the way for us. Yes; you have not done badly, my Little Wolf. The spirit of the winds has been kind to us."

The Indian muttered to himself with pleasure and afterwards asked his master :

"There will be much dollars, Gold-finder?"

"A few—a few," was the thoughtful response. "Perhaps a hundred for you and

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fifty or so for me when all expenses are paid. Oh, yes. You quite deserve a chief's share of this. Yours has been the work. I am quite pleased to have only a little for my trouble in handling these stones."

While he was thus speaking, the old man slipped the jewels into a pocket beneath his coat. Finding a lump of sugar in the same pocket he turned to give the sweet to his mare. She, beautiful coal-black creature that she was, whinnied her thanks and rubbed her nose against her master.

"Ah, old girl, that is an unexpected treat, is it not?" Newnes said, as he caressed the animal. "That comes of not being too greedy at supper time." The white head was then turned to the Indian, though the hand still continued to stroke the glossy neck. "I wonder which of the two loves me better—Shontayeega or Flashlight?" he asked whimsically.

"Shontayeega always brave for his chief," the redskin began, but he was interrupted.

"Yes—yes. But Little Wolf has been well paid. I think Flashlight would give his life for me even without a lump of sugar. Would the Chippeway?"

"He slave to do as chief say," was the humble response.

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"H'm. We will see. Do you know a place called Serpent Creek, Shontayeega?"

The Indian started at the question and regarded his questioner with an expression of apprehension. But he said nothing in reply, so the other man resumed.

"It is a very pleasant spot, I am told, though the redmen do not seem to care for it. It is chiefly the home of foxes and wolves. Shontayeega would be at home there, a Little Wolf among his friends."

"*Ka-win!*" the Indian suddenly exclaimed. "No Indian live at Serpent Creek——"

"True," was the smooth interruption. "But an Indian *will*. You will, Shontayeega!"

"Shontayeega?" gasped the redskin in horror at the very thought.

"Why, certainly. You will go where I send you, whether it be to Serpent Creek or any other creek."

By this time the Indian's limbs were quivering with fear. His vivid imagination was already living in anticipation of the many horrors which were supposed to have their abiding-place in the valley of ill-fame.

"No moccasin walk by that water," he muttered darkly to himself. But his com-

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panion received the information quite complacently.

"Then, yours shall be the first. Now, listen to me, Little Wolf. I know the old story that your people tell of the creek where the spirits of bad medicine men are cast when their deeds have unfitted them for the pleasures of the Happy Hunting-ground. It may be true——"

"It is true!" came the fierce interruption. "It is true! One day, son of chief Piapot follow deer to Serpent Creek. He little papoose. He not know spirits of dead live there in bodies of serpents and wolves. He follow deer with bow and arrow, and—he never come back to *teepee*!"

"Probably he lost his way or fell into the creek."

"He taken by serpents—he made slave to them. And they torture him; they bite him with poison fangs so he cry out at night. Many snows have come and gone; many big chiefs have led the Chippeway. But still papoose cry out. Ah, no. No man go there and live."

"Yet a man has gone there and is living very happily. He was in my office yesterday," was the quiet comment.

"Redman?" jerked out Little Wolf.

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“No. A white man. He has driven away the spirits. White men can do that, you know. So there is nothing to fear. And his reward has been gold, Shontayeega! Think of that! Gold is the reward for him who dares enter the creek! Gold!—Gold!—enough to buy a hundred broncos—enough to make you a great chief—one who could do greater things than Louis Riel! Think of it, Little Wolf! If you had gold enough you might one day give back the prairie to the redmen, while you would be the chief over all!”

With all the art of which the old man was capable, thus did persuasive tones set forth a picture most alluring to the greedy lust of Little Wolf. The vision of such unlimited wealth and power quickly banished superstition for the time.

“Does Gold-finder speak true?”

A short laugh greeted the question.

“Do you not, like others, call me Gold-finder?”

“You have spoken, but——”

“Go to Serpent Creek!” the voice was now that of a commander whose will was not to be disputed. “Go there and watch. You will find a white man living there alone. He is guarding the secret of the gold. But you will be cunning as your name. You will creep

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unseen upon the white man. In a few days I shall come to you. Then you must know the secret of the gold, and I must find that there is no white man there. Do you understand?"

Newnes had quite forsaken his previous manner of gentle speech. He rapped out the words of his order with a fierceness that was almost unbelievable as coming from such a gentle-looking person. Holmes felt his blood run cold as he listened to the plot. A man's life was to be taken! A man's life was to be reckoned as nothing compared with the gathering of gold! It was terrible, and the boy fretted at his present position, knowing how helpless he was to prevent the dastardly plot from being carried forward another step.

"If I only had a revolver, I'd jolly soon risk a rough-and-tumble, big though they are!" he said to himself. "As it is, what can I do? Nothing. If I go to the police they won't believe me, for they know nothing about me. Who is going to take the word of a tramp against that of such a fatherly looking old man as that? And, of course, the Indian would never give him away. He has too much to gain by keeping mum."

Fred was no coward. He had as much pluck as the average boy of his age, and perhaps a little more than the average. He had

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also a good deal of common sense, which made itself evident at most times except when any reference was made to his brother Cyril. But it did not take him a moment's consideration to decide that he would not have the remotest chance of successful resistance against such a pair of desperadoes if he were discovered, and if they thought that his tongue must be sealed. The Indian's figure denoted enormous strength, and the old man's wiry frame, though much slighter, did not suggest that there was much room for choice between the muscular power of the two.

No, it was not cowardice that kept the boy engaged as an eavesdropper. Call it policy, tact, anything else you please. Then wait for developments. They may help you to a better decision.

CHAPTER VII

A FIGHT FOR LIFE

THE chief of the two conspirators swung himself into the saddle.

"Now you understand, Shontayeega! Make straight for Serpent Creek and get to work at once. I shall not be far behind you."

"Shontayeega will remember the words of Gold-finder," returned the Indian; and the rider started his horse at a light canter up the slope of the little valley.

Holmes waited impatiently until he saw Flashlight and her master disappear over the brow of the hill, and when he turned to look for Shontayeega he found that the Indian, too, had disappeared.

Cautiously the boy now emerged from his hiding-place. He peered carefully in every direction, but he could see no cause for apprehension. The redskin had evidently gone about his business.

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By this time Fred had entirely forgotten his own troubles. All that gave him concern was the safety of the unknown person of Serpent Creek who, he did not doubt, was about to be the victim of a plot which was nothing less than murder. At any cost, such a plot must be frustrated, he thought. But what to do? Without money or friends, what could any boy do?

While deeply cogitating over this urgent problem, the boy passed along the narrow path that led through the bush towards the meadow at the foot of the hill. Hungry though he was, he rejected the temptation to turn his steps in the direction of the house whose light he could see at no great distance. "To save a man's life!" That was his one thought. So he turned to retrace his steps to Regina with some vague idea in his mind that, when he got there, some opportunity might be found whereby that service of duty might be rendered.

He quickened his steps when he reached the clearing, and he was just about to bend to the slope when there crept over him the horrible feeling that he was not alone—that he was being followed. It was the eerie, indefinable feeling of a presence near at hand—an unseen presence, yet none the less real on account of its invisibility.

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Fred stopped. For a few seconds he listened. Then, feeling a warm breath on his neck, he suddenly wheeled round with a cry on his lips—a cry of surprise more than actual fear—and found himself standing closely face to face with Shontayeega!

The Chippeway had been following the boy's footsteps for some distance, treading in Fred's footprints and keeping step with him as he walked. He was grinning with delight at the boy's discomfiture.

"What do you want? Why are you following me?" demanded Holmes angrily.

The Indian laughed.

"Little Wolf follow everything that walk prairie at night."

"Then you would be better employed minding your own business!"

But Little Wolf only received the lad's anger with laughter!

"White boy clever, much clever; but he no cheat the ears and eyes of Little Wolf. Little Wolf hear branch break—very little branch, but he hear it. And he follow—follow in the steps of the white boy."

"Then the sooner you follow those same steps back again, the better it will be for Little Wolf, or whatever you call yourself," was the rejoinder.

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Holmes wheeled sharply with the intention of leaving the Indian to his own company, but he was arrested by a sudden cry from the other, who suddenly pounced upon him and gripped his shoulders with powerful fingers while he stared into the lad's face with furious eyes.

"Ah! Little Wolf know you! Little Wolf remember! You and big white brother keep white squaw from Little Wolf when he wish pretty stones. White dog strike Little Wolf!"

"And you deserved it—you thief!" was Fred's reckless retort. "You were like a dog yourself to attack a woman—you savage!"

"Savage! Savage!" cried Shontayeega. The word was new to him no doubt, but he understood English well enough to gather that it was a term of contempt as Holmes used it. "Savage!" he repeated. "Little Wolf have fangs that bite! Little Wolf no dog to be beaten!"

The powerful grip tightened on the boy's shoulders as the Indian's passion blazed. He was speedily losing control of his actions, and each moment Fred was expecting to feel the giant's fingers on his throat.

Holmes shook himself free from the grip. But he was not quick enough to avoid the

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second attack. Little Wolf was as agile as his four-legged namesake. He sprang forward and swung the boy from the ground in an embrace as close and powerful as that of a bear.

"Let go!" the boy yelled. "Let go and fight fair!"

But the Indian laughed loudly at the prisoner's futile struggles.

"When ears and nose of white papoose dog are slit with Little Wolf's hunting-knife, then pale-face go free to return to his people."

The boy struggled with all his strength; but the Indian's grip was like that of a vice as he turned with his burden and began to carry him back into the bush.

Reaching the willows, the redskin plunged forward towards the creek. Here, however, his foot caught against a root, and he was obliged to release one hand to prevent himself from falling.

Fred slipped to the ground although his captor's right arm was still hugging too tightly to allow for any chance of freedom. But the boy's hand, in travelling down the Indian's body, struck against something hard. It was the handle of the redskin's hunting-knife, and it took but a flash of time for the lad to jerk the weapon from its sheath and to drive it into the left arm as it descended to renew the hold.

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Shontayeega gave a howl of rage and pain. The left arm was withdrawn, and before the fingers could again grip, Fred was beyond their reach.

The youth was like a young tiger now. He felt that he was fighting for his life, and he determined that he would only yield when there was no more fighting power left in his muscles.

"Keep back!" he cried at the pitch of his voice. "Keep back if you don't want to meet this!"

The Indian clapped his hand to his side, and a howl of rage broke from him when he discovered that he had been robbed of his only weapon.

But the resources of the redskin were by no means exhausted. Though not living in the days of ancient Rome, he was well aware that some of the same tactics of old time combat are not without their uses in the present day. A blanket deftly handled is no less an effective weapon for offence and defence against sharp steel than the deadly net of the arena. In a trice the blanket was slipped from his shoulders. True, it would be useless for his purpose in the bush. But the meadow was at no great distance, and the cunning Indian shifted his position so as to get between the

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boy and the stream. By pressing the attack he hoped to drive his young opponent backwards to the open sward. Then his advantage would be trebled. The lad would surely fall a victim to superior strength and art.

Holmes was not slow to understand the significance of these tactics. Truth to tell, he had began to think that the little advantage he had gained would serve him but ill if he did not quickly prove himself as resourceful as his enemy.

The Indian now took a step forward with the blanket hanging over his arm and shielding his body. In the starlight Fred could see a smile of triumph on the red man's face—a smile that caused the boy to bite his lip with mortification. The Chippeway had got the mastery of the combat so far, and he knew it. He was calm with the certainty of conquest. All that was now wanted was patience to stalk his prey, and no redskin lacks the virtue of patience.

Shontayeega took another step forward, and Fred was obliged to retreat a pace. The lad cast a quick glance behind him. The open ground was only a yard or two distant, and his blood boiled with rage as the Indian was heard to give a grunt of satisfaction. He had observed the quick turn of the boy's head. He

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correctly guessed what his young enemy's feelings were at the moment.

Another step forward; another pace backward—another and yet another, while neither man nor boy uttered a word.

The position was getting desperate. Fred gripped the knife and wondered what the end would be.

Again the advance of one and the retreat of the other.

Already Fred felt that his feet had left the scrub, and that he was now standing on the thick turf. Another step, and Little Wolf would also be free of the bush to carry out his plan of attack, which was no secret from the boy's quick reasoning.

It was at this point of desperation, so to speak, that Holmes seemed to feel his brain suddenly clear. Extreme straits often have the effect of soothing the faculties to a condition of calm reasoning, and it was then that there sprang into the boy's mind an idea that might serve its turn in serious fight just as it had so often served its turn in the playing-fields at home.

Turning suddenly, as though in a fit of terror, Holmes started to run. Little Wolf gave chase without hesitation. But it was only a short pursuit. After the first few yards were

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crossed, Fred threw himself on the ground directly across the path of his pursuer. The Indian plunged forward upon his face. Next instant Holmes was astride his enemy, gripping the redskin by the neck with one hand while the other flashed the hunting-knife in the air.

What would have been the result of Fred's delirious triumph at this turn in the tide of the encounter we cannot say, had not the boy felt himself gripped by an unseen hand and dragged backwards to his feet.

"What sort of a coon's game is this that you two are after on my section at midnight, eh?" demanded a man's voice at the same time as the elevating force was exerted.

Panting and trembling with excitement, Fred turned to see his interlocutor. He was a heavily bearded man, dressed in shirt, trousers and top-boots. He looked a typical backwoodsman, and he carried a formidable-looking revolver that was calculated to put an end to strife for that night at least.

"What's all this cock-fighting about, anyway?" he demanded in no pleased tones.

The Indian had quickly regained his feet and was standing mute as the boy. Both were too taken aback at the stranger's sudden appearance to have words in readiness.

"Well?" repeated the man with some

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show of angry impatience. "Ain't none of you got tongues? Rory Stocks is not the man who asks three times what folks are doing on his homestead at this hour of the night."²

"That Indian was trying to kill me——" stammered Fred, and the stranger questioned:

"Trying to kill you, was he? And who are you that a vile serpent of a redskin should be wanting to kill you?"²

"He's a thief, and——"

"Great Scott!" was the interruption, accompanied by a laugh of derision. "Nobody's been trying to steal you, have they? Says mighty little for their good taste. I ain't seen the younker that I'd want to steal. Keep them t'other side of the prairie from me. That's my idea of boys. They ain't worth shucks."

"You went out of your way to come to the rescue of one, at any rate," retorted Fred, half sulkily and half in amusement at the man's contradictory words and actions.

"Maybe I did. But that's not saying that I reckon them worth a pail of hog-wash. I'd do the same for a coyote in the grip of a bear. What have you to say for yourself, nitchie?"^{2 1}

The Indian did not answer the question.

² A colloquial form for addressing Indians.

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He had folded his blanket around him and was standing motionless and dumb as a statue.,

The stranger turned to Holmes.

“Our friend may be a daisy thief, but he doesn’t seem to be any great shakes as a talker.”

Then the man turned again to the Indian. His figure seemed to stiffen suddenly from the easy attitude in which he had been standing hitherto. He took a couple of swift paces forward until he was close to the redskin. Then he bent forward so as to look into the other’s eyes. His left hand then darted forward and gripped Shontayeega with a strength that made even the self-controlled Indian wince.

“Look here!” he said with a fierce threatening. “You are evidently a stranger in these parts and don’t know who I am. Well, let that go. But I know you, Shontayeega, and I know what you are. I know that, where you are, there’s no good thing likes to breathe the same air. It’s enough for me to see a white man with you to understand that either you are up to no good, or that you ain’t friends. So git! Git! I tell you! Off my land as fast as your legs will carry you! See?”

No further warning was needed. Whether

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it was the speaker's fierceness, or a reputation that was known to the Indian, we cannot say. But the words were no sooner out of the speaker's mouth than all the redskin's dignity fled. Shontayeega turned and ran up the slope like a startled hare.

"Oh, don't let him go!" exclaimed Holmes. "We mustn't let him go, for he has been stealing—and he has been planning murder!"

"None of which is new to Shontayeega, I reckon," was the calm answer. "When that skunk is not planning villainy, he'll be in his grave; and then he'll try to steal the shovel that's tipping the earth on top of him. But there is plenty of time to think of him. 'Tain't hard to lay hands on him if he's wanted. For the present, you'd better trot along with me to my shack and give an account of yourself. It ought to be mighty interesting, judging by the state I found you in."

CHAPTER VIII

BROKEN HOPES

BUT what of Jack Munroe? How had he been faring while Holmes had been so busy turning over new leaves in Life's book of adventure?

We left him, it will be remembered, as he started off to the railway depot in order to send the assuring telegram to Fred's parents.

Having accomplished this errand, he next proceeded to make one or two small purchases at the stores, after doing which he turned his steps once more to the Maple House.

Munroe was satisfied with his day's work. He had several reasons for self-congratulation. In the first place he had been the means of saving a life. Then he had found a friend to relieve the solitude of his lonely ranch. And last, though by no means least, he had found a way of returning a little of his debt to Cyril

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Holmes by befriending Cyril's brother in a time of dire need.

Let it be plainly understood that Fred Holmes had in no degree overstated the circumstances attending the disaster which Cyril had sustained. He had in no way deviated from the actual facts of the case in affirming that the maiming had been the result of terrible intention. That was the truth—the horrible truth; and no one was better aware of that truth than Jack himself.

Munroe had been fairly wild at school. When we say "wild" we do not mean ordinary mischievousness. Such is pardonable enough as being the usual accompaniment of robust health and good physique. But Murdoch (or "Munroe" as he had renamed himself, and as such he had better be known in this history) had shown traits of character which no right-minded person would ever attempt to excuse or overlook. He had a wild, ungovernable temper, coupled with a disposition that naturally defied all rules or restraints.

Obviously such a disposition caused the boy to be a constant source of worry to his masters. Nothing seemed to tame his unruly spirit, and several times in his career he had to be threatened with expulsion. Only respect for his father had prevented the carrying out of

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that extreme penalty in more than one instance. The consequence was that the boy began to think that he could do exactly as he pleased with impunity.

Being such a trouble to masters, it will be understood how much greater must have been the worry that he gave the prefects who shared responsibility for the maintenance of discipline. Between Munroe and the prefects there was a constant warfare. This state was not lessened when the boy reached the Sixth and was the only boy in the Form who was not a prefect. The honour of such authority had always been a right which every Sixth Form boy could claim. Jack was the first boy from whom the privilege had been withheld.

Now, for some reason which it is not necessary to enlarge upon here, Cyril was the one prefect who was most frequently called upon to exert authority over Jack. For that same reason, Jack never neglected an opportunity to vent his spleen against the prefect, who, though his equal in years, was in no degree his equal in bodily strength. A school "footer" match presented an opportunity for paying off certain old scores. Jack did not neglect that chance. He waited for it. Then he let self-control fly to the winds, and—Cyril Holmes was carried from the field maimed for life.

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We need not detail all that followed this terrible affair. There was no doubt in any person's mind but that the incident was intentional. Nor did the boy deny the charge. He expressed contrition for what he had done. But there was one aspect of character in which he never failed. He was never untruthful. When asked pointedly if he had intended to harm Holmes, he frankly admitted that such was his deliberate intention. That temper had caused him to exceed his original purpose, he also stated. But he agreed that such qualification did not lessen the offence.

Of course expulsion followed. And it was expulsion such as must live in his memory for the rest of his life. Not a master; not a boy; not a servant in the College had a kind word to say to him. His mates hooted the carriage that carried him from the gates.

All this Jack bore with a firm lip. Those who saw him in the carriage and, after, on the station platform, said that he had accepted disgrace as though it had been an honour. Hard and cruel of heart, they said. But they did not see the wistful eyes that looked out from the window as the train steamed from the station—the eyes that strained to catch the last glimpse of the old college walls. Had they seen that, perhaps there might have been

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some different opinions expressed concerning the expelled boy.

Mrs Murdoch was visiting her son's guardian uncle at the time, and Jack went to join his mother at his guardian's home in Cornwall. That was why he was travelling by railway, for his home was at Sheringdon Lea, quite close to the College.

He steeled his heart for the interview that would follow on his arrival. For certain he would be scolded—not by his mother, but by his uncle. The colonel was a kind enough man, but Jack felt sure that he would receive little enough kindness now. He imagined the kind of reception that he would receive from the old soldier—probably a “general flare up all round,” to use his own words.

But the scene was quite different in reality from that of imagination.

On reaching the Manor House he was conducted immediately to the library where his uncle was awaiting him.

“Well, my boy,” said the man by way of greeting, as he took hearty grip of one of his nephew's hands and laid his own left hand kindly on the boy's shoulder. “Well, you have made a mess of your life up to now. There is no use denying that. But your father was a gentleman, and I still expect

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great things from his son. You must live things down, and prove, by your own aid, that you are not the cad people have named you. I don't think you are; neither does your mother. We think that you have been foolish, and we think that you have done wrong. But neither of us is ever going to speak of this affair again, because we know that we shall have reason to be proud of the future. If ever you need my help or advice, you know where to seek it. Now go to your mother. You'll find her in the drawing-room."

From that minute Jack was a changed person. He left the library feeling very much like blubbering. The unexpected kindness had quite broken down the stubborn anger, and installed in its place a stubborn purpose to prove that he would yet do some good in the world.

Anxious to make a start without delay, Jack had not had difficulty in persuading his uncle to allow him to go to Canada.

"I'll find a place where the work is the hardest, and I'll stay there until I am fit company for other fellows. At present I am only fit to live with animals," had been the views that he had expressed to himself. And for nearly three years he had lived a solitary life at Serpent Creek.

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The medicine was drastic, but it was effective. He had only occasional visitors from distant ranches, and he only went to Saskatoon once a fortnight for letters and supplies. There had been no opportunities for lapsing into passions until that moment of "seeing red" when he had tried to free himself from the burden in the lake—perhaps almost pardonable in that instance, considering the extremity.

And now had come this cheering aid to the work of "living it down." He was going to provide a home and a future for Cyril's brother! That was one manner of partly redeeming the past that he had never dreamed of, and we may imagine the eagerness with which he had grasped the opportunity.

Cyril's brother, he determined, would in future be as his own brother. He mentally pledged himself that nothing in his power should be left undone to make life smooth for the boy, and perhaps we may excuse him if the thought did come to him at the time, in the form of a hope, that such action might some day earn him the forgiveness of the comrade whose life he had spoiled.

So it was with a more hopeful heart than he had experienced for three years that he returned to the Maple House, after having

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completed the first act of this service which he had undertaken.

On entering the parlour, he was rather surprised to find that it was empty.

Imagining that Fred had become tired of waiting alone and gone out for a stroll to pass the time, his friend's absence did not disturb him.

Then he noticed the papers on the table.

Fearing some calamity, yet not knowing what it was he dreaded, Jack bent to examine the heap.

He glanced at the little pile of money. Next he picked up the sheet of paper on which Holmes had written his farewell message.

He read, and then—he understood—he understood he had built a castle on a foundation of sand.

Dazed in mind and crushed in spirit, he stood and stared at the document. For a time, although he realised what it meant, he had difficulty in crediting the evidence of his senses.

"It can't be true! It can't be true!" he kept repeating to himself. But it was true. It was no horrible dream; no deception of the senses. Fred had gone! Fred had thrown the offer of kindness back into the teeth of the

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offerer. He had been denied the one great chance of retrieving the past. He honestly believed now that Fred's attitude represented, not only that boy's opinion, but the opinion of Cyril as well: that he had sinned beyond earthly forgiveness.

It was a cruel blow to one who had tried so pluckily to undo the knots of the past.

"Even a boy three years my junior goes from me in horror when he knows who I am!" he groaned.

Truly, he thought, the brand of Cain was on his brow. All men's hands were turned against him.

The scribbled message fluttered from Jack's fingers.

"What's the use of trying any more?" he asked himself. "Why not give up the battle and live for my own enjoyment? If those whom I want for friends refuse to have me—well, let them do without! There are others—plenty of others who will be glad to know me when I have gold at my command."

These were not noble thoughts. No; they were even the thoughts of a coward.

But it is very difficult to be always brave. It is not always so easy to rise up pluckily and

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renew the fight when the blow received has been nearly a knock-out one.

Luckily Jack's period of weakness was only brief. The stern mental discipline which he had forced himself to undergo during the three years had not been wasted time. It was not possible for such a habit to lose its power all at once.

"There must be some way to put things straight," he exclaimed, with a return of the old determination. "Yes, there must! And—I'll find that way!"

His first thought then was to go out and search for Fred and try to persuade him to return. Second thoughts convinced him that such a step would be mistaken. You cannot force friendship. If Holmes hated him so much at present, the gulf might be only widened by pressing his services at such a time.

No. The obvious course was for him to pursue his old plans for the present, and leave Fred to follow the path that he had chosen. Time might yet be kind and show a way for him to befriend the boy without intruding the unwelcome self.

"I'll leave the future to God to show me what to do for the best. A battle lost to-day may mean a battle won to-morrow," was his resolution.

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And the next morning saw the young rancher hastening back to the ranch called "Nowhere," as fast as the north-bound train could carry him.

CHAPTER IX

A TRAPPER'S SHANTY

FRED HOLMES had some little difficulty in keeping pace with the long strides of his new friend, who was leading the way towards a small shanty some little distance from where the fight had taken place. Had he not been thoroughly fatigued, he might not have experienced the same inconvenience, and had his companion been aware of what the boy had undergone during the previous twenty-four hours, he might have been more considerate of Fred's consequent limitations.

As it was, Rory Stocks marched as though he were leading an army to storm a city, and he talked like a phonograph all the time—that is to say, he spoke his own recorded thoughts without seeming to care whether they were listened to or not.

“An out-an-out rotten skunk is that Shontayeega. This ain't the first time that

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he's come my way by a long chalk, and I guess it won't be the last. One of these days he'll be sure to put his foot in a badger hole, and then he'll find my hand upon him in a way that he won't forget. Cunning? That's not the word for it. He'd beat a serpent at its own game, and that's saying a deal for the serpent. But he forgot himself to-night. Couldn't keep his mouth shut. You may thank your stars for that, younker. It was his yell that roused me out just as I was going to turn into my bunk. Yes, sir. He'd have fixed you right enough before he had broken up the little party."

"It was awfully decent of you——" began Fred, but the man continued talking just as though the boy had not uttered a word—

"There's no low-down trick of fighting that's not in that greasy head of his. Git him on the square—git him clear out on the prairie with a shooter or a club, and I'd bet that a brisk kid could lay him out. But biting, scratching—low-down ways of the night are his games. Yes, that's the way of Little Wolf, and don't you forget it."

"I don't think I am at all likely to forget it!" said Fred, but again the man "talked through him"—

"Here we are, sonny. It isn't much of a

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family mansion, but such as it is you are welcome. And I guess a bit of grub would not be out of the way? You don't look particularly fresh! Not much of the morning glory about you, as far as I can see by lamplight. But never mind. Just you sling your bones on that bunk for a bit while I hustle round the larder. This is batch-hall. Make yourself at home."

"But I thought you said that you would not go out of your way to do anything for a boy?" Fred could not resist remarking in quiet chaffing.

"Glad you have such a good memory for facts, as facts they be," was the rejoinder. "Who's going out of their way, I'd like to know?"

"Well, you seem to be——"

"Just where you make a mistake. It's the yokner who has done the going out of the way in coming here. I've taken the straight trail to my own shack."

It was rough hospitality, but it was plain to see that there was a kind heart prompting it, though the form of invitation was peculiar.

Uttering a few words of thanks, Holmes was only too glad to rest according to instructions. He found a comfortable enough bed in a corner of the single-roomed shanty, and lost

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no time in stretching himself upon it while his host actively set to work to prepare a meal.

Fred was thoroughly weary, but he was deeply interested in this first sight of the interior of a real prairie shanty.

As we have said, the house consisted of a single room. The main furnishings comprised a bed, a table, a couple of chairs, a stove, and two substantial trunks, one of which served the purpose of store-room for perishable food-stuffs. Two shelves ran across the entire wall at one end of the room. These held books, tins of tomatoes, cartridges, and other odds and ends. The rest of the walls were nearly hidden by a miscellaneous collection of clothes, rifles, harness, fur robes, and a looking-glass of such dimensions that it would have been difficult to see the reflection of the tip of one's nose therein.

It was all very interesting to the boy. He had often read of such places, and, indeed, had quite expected soon to be the owner of such a peculiar museum himself.

Then a strange thing happened.

As he lay studying the interior of the shanty and listening to Rory's cheerful humming while dishes rattled and knives clattered, the walls seemed gradually to stretch out to an immense distance. Then they came back

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again—quite clear; then they once more faded until the boy could scarcely see them. And Rory—he seemed to have become a sort of shapeless figure that moved about in a mist. And the clatter of tins and china got mixed up with Indian war-whoops, church-bells, storms, and rushing water. Then he saw a figure coming towards him out from the mist. A cup containing warm milk was held to his lips. He drank. It was most comforting. Next he thought he heard a voice saying something about: “That’s right. There’s nothing like hot milk. Have another pull!” He could not be really sure that he heard anything at all. Indeed, for the moment, he laughed inwardly at the thought of any person making such a silly remark.

“Of course, there are lots of things like hot milk,” he said in half a whisper. “There’s hot lime—hot paste—hot—hot——”

“Well, sonny, how are things going now?”

Holmes started up and gazed around him.

Was he dreaming? A moment ago, and he had lain down in the lamp-light. Now it was bright day. Rory Stocks was standing beside his bed with a cup in his hand looking down upon the late slumberer with a cheery smile that lit up his whole face.

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A loud laugh broke the spell of the boy's wandering brain.

"Well? Thought I was a ghost, did you?"

"Wha—what's the time?" Fred stammered.

"Ten o'clock by the sun."

"Ten o'clock? Morning?"

"I guess the sun don't shine very bright in these parts at ten o' the night," was the good-humoured response.

"Then, I have been—asleep?"

"Like a log. Absolutely the best sleep that I have seen since the night when I woke up and found myself snoring and then couldn't waken myself to put a stop to it. You went off while I was getting some grub for you—not much of a compliment to me; but we'll let it go at that. So I gave you a swill of hot milk and—well, you've just finished a morning cup as well, without knowing it."

Holmes laughed as he moved to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

"Golly! But I must have been tired!" he said.

"Dead beat, by the look of things," Rory returned. "However, you may as well turn out now. The sun has aired the prairie, so you won't catch a chill. You'll find a pail of water and a basin on the log outside the door.

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Breakfast will be ready in two shakes of a monkey's tail."

Fred was not slow in following the instructions of his host. A thorough sousing with cold water quickly dispelled the after-effects of heavy sleep, and by the time he returned within doors, the fragrant smell of coffee mingled with that of hot bacon awakened an appetite that was next thing to ravenous.

"Now, pile in!" was the order. "I had my feed when the buffalo birds were having theirs; so don't wait for knife-and-fork company."

"Do you always live alone here?" Fred questioned as he sat down to tackle the welcome fight.

"Most times," replied the man. "I am a—a sort of trapper by trade. Sometimes I am here; other times in the prairie—in the bush—anywhere. When I go off, I leave my cow and chickens with a neighbour who looks after them. Yes, it's a trapper, I am," and the speaker laughed at some joke which, for the time being at least, was hidden from the boy's understanding.

"I should think that you find the life—trapping, I mean—rather lonely," Fred remarked with interest, and his host echoed:

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"Lonely? Gee-whiz! What is there to make a man lonely?"

"Well, I suppose often you are away from civilisation for days at a time——"

"Weeks would be more like it; or months——"

"Well, months. Don't you often feel lonely for want of a fellow to talk to?"

"Narey a bit. What is there to make a man lonely when he has bears and wolves and minks for company; not to speak of prairie chicken, jack rabbits, and skylarks? Bah! If you want to make me real downright lonely, put me in a drawing-room where all you hear is 'Fine day.—Not so good as it was yesterday.—Seems like rain.'—That's the sort of place that makes me lonely. But when you hear the wolves yapping at the tail of their supper at night; when you spend whole days following the track of a redskin——"

"A redskin?" exclaimed Fred in natural surprise. But Rory hastily corrected:

"—A red fox; when the snow-birds are chattering around the door of your shack, or the snow owl is following on your trail in the evening without a sound—flap, flap—a steady pace and as silent as a ghost—that's what I call 'company.' It's the sort of company that

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never did a man any harm. You may bet your bottom dollar on that."

The trapper paused thoughtfully for a time after this considerable speech; then, as his guest seemed at last to have come near to the end of his meal, the former jerked out:

"I guess now you know most there is to know about me. What about yourself? Got any place to go to?"

"No."

"Any friends?"

"Not one."

"Then, what on earth were you doing gallivanting on my section at midnight?" exclaimed the man with open-eyed astonishment. "By the looks of you, you're not long from the Old Country."

"I only arrived at Regina two days ago——"

"On spec.? I see. On the look-out for a job."

"But all my outfit—everything I possessed was destroyed by the cyclone," explained Fred.

The trapper gave a long whistle—a sympathetic whistle, if our meaning be understood.

"That was bad luck—mighty bad luck, sonny. Yet that does not explain things. I

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guess the cyclone didn't blow you all this distance from Regina."

Silence fell between the two. Rory Stocks was puzzled. He had met with many peculiar people in his time—honest people and frauds; men who could tell plausible falsehoods with all the air of truth, and men who sometimes told the unpleasant truth with an aspect that seemed to discredit their words. There was something mysterious about this boy. Of that he was certain. Now he was trying to decide to which of the classes—liars or truth-tellers—Holmes belonged. So he looked into the boy's face with a keen stare that was somewhat disconcerting.

Holmes, on the other hand, was in no less difficult a quandary. He did not know how far it would be wise to trust a stranger with his story. And yet, the man had been kind to him. He was rough in his manner, but beneath it all he could see a substratum of kindness that encouraged confidence. He was such a strong man. He appeared to be the sort of man on whom one might lean, knowing that the support (moral or physical) would prove reliable.

Rory waited for some time. Then, seeing that the boy was diffident about speaking, he tried to open the way for him.

"Look here, younker," he said. "I'm not

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the sort of man to push myself where I'm not wanted. If a coon gives me the mind-your-own-business look—well, I guess I can take a hint as well as any, and lose no bad blood over it. But this is something different to the usual run. Here's you—without kith or kin, or dollars, I wouldn't mind betting—you dropped down on my homestead from the skies, as it were. And I tumble across you fighting for your life with a measly redskin. Well, you'll admit that it takes a bit of guessing to find out what it all means. Naturally, I'm mighty curious. I'd like to know all about it, for it don't take a wink of a skeeter's eye for me to guess that you're a coon that needs help. I leave it to you, though. If you want my help out of a tight corner—Rory Stocks is not the man to put his hands in his pockets and keep them there."

Fred did not require further coaxing. The man's manner was enough to tell the boy that he had found a friend who could be trusted. And remember, Fred was utterly without friends. He was in a new country; and he had but the vaguest knowledge how to set to work to fend for himself.

"You've been awfully decent to me——" he began stammeringly, and the tribute was cut short by his companion.

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"You can leave out all that part, sonny. I like boys, though you may not believe it, for I say things to see what stuff they are made of. But you can believe it that any boy who needs me for a chum—he's only got to say so, and no thanks expected or wanted. See?"

"I see," returned Fred gratefully. "Well, I am going to tell you my story right from the beginning."

"I reckon that's about the best way. No good doing anything by halves," was the quiet and encouraging response.

Then Fred poured out all his troubles. He began from the start of things—much where he had begun when relating the same tale to Jack Munroe. He told all the incident of the football match, the home circumstances which followed, the adventure in the cyclone, the rescue by Jack, and his ultimate flight from Regina. Finally he described all the incidents of the previous night when he heard the plot between the Indian and the mysterious rider of the black mare, concluding :

"Before I was attacked, it was my intention to go back to Regina and take my chance of being believed by the police, for, of course, I couldn't hear of a murder being planned without trying to do something to prevent it."

"That you couldn't," repeated Stocks.

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"By the way, what did you say the coon was like—not the Indian—I know every wrinkle on his face—but the other? Had he longish white hair and a straight nose and a kind of spring-heeled way of moving about?"

"Yes. You describe him exactly," replied Fred. "Do you know him?"

"A little," was the cautious reply. "Yes—a little. And it was a bit of luck your telling me before you went to the police. It would take a deal of telling to fix up that yarn against *him*. He's supposed to be one of the richest coons in the West. Nobody seems to know where his money comes from, but—— Well, I've suspicioned him for a goodish time, and I'd like to lay him by the heels. Curtis Newnes is supposed to be his name——"

"Supposed?" repeated Fred, whose interest was thoroughly aroused.

"H'm, yes. Supposed. And I guess we can leave it at that for the present. But I see that it will be no easy thing to bring this home to the old varmint."

"There's the Indian," suggested Holmes. "Couldn't he be made to own up?"

Stocks grunted incredulously.

"You've got to catch him first. That's no easy job either. No; it appears to

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me like this: you've got to prevent that murder yourself—at least, you and me together——”

“We?” exclaimed Holmes. “How in all the wide world are we to do it?”

Stocks tapped his pipe against the toe of his boot preparatory to recharging as he remarked quietly:

“It's wonderful what some folks can do if they set their minds to it. Now, it seems to me that we can get on the trail pretty slick. You'll have to put in another night's rest while I fix things here. Sam Keal will look after my affairs for me—he's used to my sudden calls by this time. Likewise he'll be able to lend me a horse. By the way, where was it that old Curtis told Little Wolf to go? Settler's Creek? That's a new district to me.”

“No. It was Serpent Creek,” Fred corrected.

“Ah! That's a different matter. Clean ploughing to reach there. It's a bit of a wild spot about a hundred and thirty miles northwest from here. And I reckon our work will be fairly easy, as there's only one settler in the Creek. I tumbled across him last fall when I was out—trapping; yes, I was trapping at the time. And right good company he was, too. One of your own countrymen. So it's him—

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Jack Munroe—that old Curtis Newnes has got his knife into ! ”

The latter part of Rory's speech had been spoken in the low undertone of a man who was considering the situation in his own mind rather than discussing it with another. His thoughts were wandering into the land of ways-and-means and other matters of which his young companion knew nothing. It was considerably surprising then, when Fred suddenly started up from his chair at the mention of Munroe's name, at the same time exclaiming in the utmost agitation :

“ Who ? What name did you say ? ”

Stocks looked up with quiet amusement in his eyes.

“ Say, sonny my lad ! Them elegant chairs of mine will soon lose their aristocratic polish if you knock them about like that ! ”

“ Oh, bother the old chairs ! ” was the rude rejoinder. “ I want to know that fellow's name—the one at Serpent Creek ! ”

“ Well, if you must know—and it looks mighty like as if you'd shoot me if I don't tell you—I said ‘ Jack Munroe ’——”

“ He ! ” the boy gasped. Then, after a moment's pause, “ That settles it——”

“ No doubt——”

“ Jack Munroe can look out for himself——”

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“Eh?”

The man jerked out the syllable sharply and again turned his keen, searching eyes upon the lad.

“What’s that?” he asked brusquely.

“That Jack Munroe can look out for himself!” was the hot retort.

“H’m. Got scared?” The trapper had resumed his previous calm demeanour. “Well, well. I ain’t surprised. It’s a bit of a risk for a younker——”

“It isn’t that!” Fred broke in passionately. “That isn’t the reason. I am not afraid. But I’m not going to move an inch to help that fellow if I knew that he was going to be shot in five minutes!”

“Pretty sentiments, sonny—very pretty sentiments,” was the comment. “It’s so nice seeing folks shot. Quite like a school treat!”

“Oh, don’t laugh at me, for I mean every word of it!” exclaimed Fred, whose temper was being fanned by Rory’s chaffing manner. “Don’t you see, that fellow Munroe is the beast I told you about—the one that lamed my brother——”

“And saved your life,” added the man. “He seems a sort of juggler—tossing life and death from one hand to another.”

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"He paid himself for that when he lamed Cyril," said Fred with no diminished anger. "From that day we owe him no debt but that of revenge! Anything that happens to him will not be one half of what he deserves."

Rory Stocks was patient. He listened to the boy's story and heard Munroe denounced without a word of reproof for the irresponsible words that the boy let loose. Probably, being himself a true-hearted man and one who was loyal in every sense of the word, he was well able to sympathise with Holmes, even though he could not agree with the wild opinions that were uttered. But when the speaker had finished, he remarked in the quiet way:

"So anything that happens to him will not be half what he deserves?"

"Not half—nor a quarter!" was Fred's response; and the man commented thoughtfully:

"I wonder what would happen to the world if we all received even one-hundredth part of what we deserve? I guess we'd be a mighty poor show by the time we came out of the punishment."

"But that bounder——"

"There's not a son of us that ain't a bounder at least once in our lives. Well, sonny,

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you've told your yarn, and I'm not saying but what I've got a heap of sympathy for you in many ways. It's been hard on you, and it's been hard on others. But I'd like to tell you another school story. Maybe it'll help us both to see things clearer. So sit down again for a bit. I'll spin the telling as short as I can.

“ When I was at school, it was only a rough shanty down in California—a one-horse place run by old John O'Hara. He was a clever coon in his way; but he didn't know much about boys. He was more taken up with gathering plants and sticking their dried skeletons on sheets of paper. Well, when I was a younker there, one of my mates was a double-faced kid of the name of Dan Sheen; and he worried me no end with his sneaking ways. Oh, yes; he was a sneak in those days, and no mistake about it. He was a downright serpent at that time. He had a habit of doing all sorts of low tricks in a way that was seldom found out. You see, I had rather a bad name for mischief with old O'Hara, and Sheen used to manage things so as I got the blame—and the hickory stick. Dan would never own up, and it was a point of honour with us not to split on a mate even though we had to be licked when we didn't deserve it.

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“ Well, one day I thought of a plan to get even with Dan. I’d been trying to do it for long, but till then I’d never managed to hit upon anything that would put him in the same place as I’d been so often with old John—that is to say, face downwards over a desk.

“ But one day I sidled up to Dan most coaxing.

“ ‘ Say, Dan,’ said I, ‘ I’ve got a bully plan for filling up the long afternoons between this and harvest,’ and I forked out a little game which I needn’t go into now, except to explain that it was smartly planned to get Dan into hot water with old O’Hara. And I succeeded. I managed to plant on Dan the most unholy caning that ever a youngster got in that school.

“ Well, Dan didn’t forget that trick in a hurry. Not a word did he speak to one of us for weeks. He had tumbled to it that the whole concern was a plant to get him into trouble, and he vowed that if ever he got a chance to revenge himself upon me, he would pay the last cent of the debt.”

Here the trapper paused.

Fred, who had been much interested, questioned : “ And did he ? ”

Rory did not answer at once. He had

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relapsed into a sort of dreamy state, and was looking steadily in front of him into space.

"And did he?" repeated Holmes.

"Did—who?" asked Stocks absent-mindedly.

"Well, did he have his revenge?"

"Who? Oh, yes, Sheen. Yes, sonny"—again the dreamy expression,— "he paid that debt. He paid it one day in a mining-town in California. We were grown men by that time. We had become sort of friends—not pals, exactly; but just ordinary friends. And I had a quarrel with a man who had been fleecing a tenderfoot in a saloon. The sharper was quicker than me in those days. He had out his gun before I had time to lay a hand on mine; and—Dan Sheen paid his debt. He deliberately stepped—between me and—that—gun. Then he dropped—in his tracks—at my—feet. 'You've got a mother at home to keep, Rory. There's narey a soul cares what becomes of me,' were the only words he ever spoke afterwards. Then it was, sonny, that I understood what a grand revenge some folks can take."

The speaker's voice faded to a whisper, and for some time the man and the boy sat together in absolute silence.

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Then Rory felt a hand reach for his, and he was conscious of the warm pressure of Fred's fingers.

"We'll start for Serpent Creek — tomorrow," he heard a voice saying huskily; and the answering pressure told the boy that his noble resolve was understood.

CHAPTER X

THE RANCH CALLED "NOWHERE"

JACK MUNROE returned to the ranch which he had christened "Nowhere."

Until this time, he had not realised how utterly lonely his self-ordained exile was. His spirits had been buoyed with the belief that he was conquering a besetting weakness, and that the solitary life was daily helping him to make the conquest more certain.

What his ultimate intentions had been, he had but little idea. Perhaps he had a vague thought that some day he would be fit to return to his old home to prove that he had wiped out the stain on the good name which his father had left as his chief legacy. But whatever fleeting thoughts of the future may have entered his mind, he certainly considered the present in the light of a purifying fire. Frankly, we do not agree with the methods which he chose to adopt. We would have preferred to have seen him not shunning his

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fellow-men. We would have preferred to have seen him associating with others of his kind, from whom he might have learned much that a solitary life can never teach. However, his intentions were good. He believed that he was not fit to mix with men of honour. So his home was "Nowhere."

But Fred's treatment of proffered friendship had been a severe blow. Apart from any other considerations, Jack had been greatly attracted by the boy's manner. He was frequently influenced by first impressions, and even if Holmes had not been Cyril's brother, he would have felt impelled to seek the younger lad's friendship.

Moreover, as we said, this meeting with a possible friend had been the means of forcing him to realise how severe his self-inflicted punishment was. It had taken but a very little time for Jack to see his home as quite a changed picture. He thought how fine it would be to have someone with whom to discuss plans for the future. Yes, it is always pleasant to be able to exchange views concerning our schemes, as it is equally satisfactory to have an ear at hand into which to pour confidences regarding failures. The misfortunes of life do not seem half so hard to us when we can tell them to a sympathetic friend.

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But, apart from these views, we can easily understand how great must have been the young rancher's satisfaction at the thought of doing a real kindness to a boy who was utterly without any friends, and who was quite destitute of means. And when that boy was actually the brother of him whom he had so cruelly wronged—well, his feelings may be more easily understood than described.

Then, as we know, all these bright hopes were dashed to the ground within the space of little more than one hour, and he returned to his ranch more lonely than before, since the cup of pleasure had been all but tasted.

Dismounting from his broncho, which he had left in the livery stable of Saskatoon, while he trained to and from Regina, he opened the door of his shanty. It was a one-roomed building after the stock pattern of settlers' first homes.

How empty the place seemed! How hollow was the sound of his feet upon the bare boards!

Then he thought of his dog "Zito." Strange that he had not come to welcome his master!

"Not even a dog to show pleasure when I come back," he said sadly to himself.

Returning to the door, he whistled. Then he called "Zito! Zito!"

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Still there was no answer.

"That's strange," he said. "He's not often far away when I come home. And I've often been longer away, leaving him in charge. I wonder where he can have gone to!"

Again he called and whistled alternately.

"Perhaps he has gone hunting," was the next suggestion. But this explanation was quickly set aside. Zito, a bright fox-terrier, was not an animal that was fond of solitary sport. He always preferred to stay near home, with other creatures of the farm for company. Besides, a plentiful supply of food had been left in the stable for the needs of several days.

Once more Jack called, after doing which he walked to the stables with his mare to see to her comfort before he carried further the search for his absent friend.

Then he understood the reason why there had been no whimper of welcome.

Zito was dead. The remains of his tormented body were lying on the pathway by the stable door. The footprints on the dust showed that his little friend had fallen a prey to a large bear—probably a grizzly, judging by the size of the tracks.

How the poor creature had come within reach of the fierce monster, there were no means for learning. Zito could have easily out-distanced

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any bear in the chase, and there were many retreats where he could have been safe. But, knowing his dog, Jack had no doubt that the faithful animal had simply died in defence of his master's home and property. A stranger had tried to enter the stable. Long seams on the still closed door indicated that such an attempt had been made. So Zito had shown fight, and died—faithful.

What better death can man or dog die?

Thoroughly distressed by this additional sorrow to his home-coming, Jack tenderly gathered what remained of his little friend and found a burying-place in the small flower-garden which he had cultivated at the back of the shanty. Then he took a rifle with him while he went to see how his stock fared.

He found his two milk-cows sadly in need of relief. Necessity had obliged him to leave them for these three days without being able to make any arrangement for having them milked. Of course, he had not intended his absence to have been so prolonged as circumstances necessitated.

"All right, old ladies!" he called in answer to their loud reminders. "I won't be long. A little while longer, until I have had a look at your relations."

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Jack walked quickly to the fenced paddock where he had left some steers.

Here again he met disappointment. The corral was empty. At one corner the fence was broken, and it needed no great experience to inform the youth that only a maddened charge of the combined animals could have burst so strong a boundary. Here, as at the stable, the explanation was quickly found. The remains of one of his best animals lay but a little way from the gap.

The poor rancher was furious. Then and there he started to look for tracks with the intention of following the marauder, and dealing punishment with the rifle. There is no mistaking the footprints of a bear, so he had no difficulty in getting on the scent. But he soon lost it again in the multitude of marks left by the stampeding steers. The latter he found contentedly feeding in the haylands at the opposite side of the river. Then, night falling, he was obliged to give up his search and return to the ranch, where the overburdened cows were eagerly waiting his services.

The night was peaceful. After the fatigues of the previous days, Jack slept heavily. When he awakened the next morning, he was fresh and vigorous.

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After breakfast the first duties of the day consisted of feeding the mare, Belle; milking the cattle; rounding-up the few horses which were always left free upon the prairie. The latter kept to the usual feed rounds; so they were soon found. This day, however, he had extra work to do in repairing the broken corral, and, between that and other "chores," it was noon before Munroe knew how the hours were passing.

As a rule, September and October were Jack's slack months. His small crops had been harvested; the winter's hay had been stacked; so that now there was a pause between the distinct labours of summer and winter.

But this autumn Jack had other work to do. Hitherto he had carelessly neglected to complete what is understood by "improvements," which means the necessary cultivation of the ground which the Canadian Government rightly insists shall be done before a settler may claim his land for his own. Three years are allowed for the completion of these obligations. Jack had not given the matter much thought until a Government inspector had pointedly reminded him of the omission. However, he had still two clear months at his command before the first snap of the winter

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might be expected; so the completing of "improvements" did not cause him much anxiety.

Then we are aware of another reason why the Indian summer was not likely to prove an idle one this year. There was that little matter of the gold.

Munroe's faith in his discovery had not been shaken by Curtis Newnes' wet blanket. He was determined to carry his experiments much farther. After all, he had plenty of time to spare. He could divide the weeks between ploughing and gold-washing. The latter could hardly be fruitless labour if it were done in his spare time, even though the results were but small.

Yet Jack was not forgetful of duties that had first claim upon him. The destroyer of his dog had yet to be found. After that he would be free to turn to other affairs with an easy mind.

Unfortunately for his success, Munroe was no experienced hunter of big game. He lacked that experience of woodcraft which can distinguish the tracks of the recent moment from those of an hour before, and he occupied the whole of that afternoon in beating the bush in all directions. But the spoor completely baffled him.

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Probably it was just as well that the young hunter failed in his quest. Pluck is not everything when one is on a bear hunt. Unless a man possesses a good rifle, a sure aim, and a perfect knowledge of the moods and habits of bears, the odds are considerably against the hunter when he comes face to face with an enemy in the form of a bundle of muscle and fury clothed in thick fur. It takes a "dead shot" to send the life from a grizzly with the first bullet. Failing that perfect aim in the first instance there is not often an opportunity for repeating the experiment. The intrepid hunter is then apt to experience the sensations of a bunny-hug which is neither gentle nor kind. The meeting of furious teeth in the neck does not leave any opportunity for deciding whether the sensation is pleasant or otherwise. That hunter will seek no more grizzly bears.

So, all things considered, Jack was to be congratulated upon his failure. It gave him the impression that the bear had forsaken the locality, and that belief probably saved his life.

Next day he seriously gave his mind to the matter of gold-washing. Of course he knew that, to a certain extent, he would be working in the dark, for, no matter how much one has

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read, book-lore is quite different from actual experience. However, he had a general idea how a sluice ought to be made, and a fair knowledge of how the actual washing was done. So he loaded a barrow with planks of wood, implements and other necessities, and started out at an early hour, merely turning the key at the outside of the shanty door according to custom, since the latch was sometimes apt to slip.

The spot where the first sample had been procured was some distance down the river. Without considerable clearing operations, as well as making a long ladder to descend the cliffs, it was only accessible by way of the bed of the river itself. He had found the place one day while following a wounded mink, and had bagged the game on the very strand which had yielded the glimpse of treasure.

Reaching the bank of the river, it was necessary to convey the wood and implements on his shoulders while he picked a careful path along the narrow margin that had been left bare by the summer drought. The process was tedious. The river twined for nearly a mile without traversing half that distance as the crow flies. Moreover, in some places the water ran swiftly and completely filled the bed, so that the journey had to be made in

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these parts by struggling from boulder to boulder.

Then the boundaries narrowed. The friction of centuries of swift current had cut a passage through solid rock until the river was bordered by smooth cliffs like a miniature cañon. Here the water deepened. It was also divided in a rather remarkable manner by a huge tower crowded with bushes. On the north side of that tower, where the friction of the water had been the stronger, the cliff had been gnawed to the form of a horse-shoe. Here, the walls were as smooth as polished marble; the hollow was a deep pool of swiftly flowing water; the margin was a fringe of sand that permitted a foot-path entrance to the Horse-shoe at one point, but met the water at the opposite point, so that no exit was possible that way.

Yes, it was tedious work conveying the materials to such a place. But Jack was not easily disheartened. Possibly he was beginning to experience just a little of the gold-fever that enables men to surmount tremendous difficulties which at other times would cast them down.

By noon the transporting was completed, and by the time dusk fell he had erected the sluice, and was able to congratulate himself

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upon having accomplished a satisfactory day's work.

While he had been struggling with his successive burdens along the course of the river, he had more than once thought he heard a rustling of the bushes near by as though some person were pushing a path through the tangled vegetation. Two or three times he stopped to listen but, curiously enough, each time he paused the rustling ceased also.

At first, Jack paid very little heed to the coincidence. The bush is always full of strange sounds, and one often imagines foot-falls which are only the quivering of twigs against a hollow trunk, or hears whispering voices that are only the stirring of aspen leaves. So Munroe did not give much thought to the mysterious sounds that day, further than to remark to himself how much they imitated an echo to his own steps.

But again the rancher's woodcraft was at fault. Any trapper would have readily explained the phenomena in a few words. They were nothing else but the careful tactics of an animal stalking a hoped-for prey—waiting for an opportunity to pounce.

Had Jack known this, his day's work might not have been accomplished with such comfort. He did not know that keen eyes were watching

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every movement that he made. He did not know that a massive body lay patiently waiting for him to make the first move each time he rested. That body kept pace with him all day—walked when he walked, rested ~~when~~ he rested; but all the time two eyes were fixed upon him with a hungry glare.

Towards night, these movements (real or fancied) began to "get upon his nerves." It is an unpleasant sensation to feel that unseen eyes are watching you, even though you may know that (or believe that) the eyes are only those of imagination. The thought was disturbing to the young fellow. Moreover, it continued for a couple of days. When he went to the Horse-shoe, it always seemed to him that unseen feet accompanied him. On the first day after the making of the sluice, he took the precaution to provide himself with a rifle. Finding no use for the weapon, however, he left it at home on the third day.

But it was not long before the explanation was forthcoming.

On the fourth morning, soon after Jack had set to work gold-washing—bending over the sluice and ankle-deep in water—his attention was diverted by the sound of a dry branch cracking somewhere in the bush at the top of the cliff. It was an unusually sharp report—

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too loud to have been caused by any of the ordinary rodents of the forest.

Hearing nothing further to cause apprehension, Jack resumed work; but presently there reached his ears a sound like that of very distant thunder.

Startled, the rancher looked up, and then, for the first time, he guessed what had been the cause of the mysterious rustlings that had followed him those three days.

Two large, hairy paws were hanging over the edge of the cliff above him; a brown muzzle and a pair of upright ears were resting between these paws; a pair of glittering eyes were fixed upon him with a steady gaze which can only be described as a "blood-hunger stare."

Munroe was more than ordinarily startled, though he saw no reason for immediate concern. The bear certainly could not descend the face of that cliff. He picked up a piece of rock and threw it with an accuracy of aim that drew forth a deep growl. Then the grizzly slowly raised its huge body and stood upright on the edge of the cliff.

"Get out of it, you ugly beast!" Jack called as he sent a second stone to explain the meaning of his words.

Again the animal growled. Apparently,

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however, it understood the practical hint, for it turned and disappeared from view behind the edge of the rock.

Jack waited for some time to see whether his visitor intended to put in an appearance again. But evidently the bear considered that the interview had been sufficient for that day.

"I mustn't forget to bring that rifle with me after dinner," Jack remarked. "If the creature shows himself like that again it will be a mark that even a coconut-shier could not miss."

Once more the rancher resumed his work. Since yesterday he had attained comparative success with the washing and had added a little to the small leather bag which he kept concealed under the eaves of his shanty—inside, of course.

It must have been for nearly an hour that he now worked without interruption, singing to himself and forgetful of all his troubles by reason of the pleasure of work.

Then a second time that morning he started, and on this occasion a thrill of fear ran through his whole body, for again the bear had intimated its presence with a growl that actually had a ring of triumph.

Jack wheeled around.

The grizzly was lying crouched on the sand

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right at the corner of the horse-shoe opening !

He had waited in patience for this moment. The stalking was over. Now the prey was surely trapped !

CHAPTER XI

MAN V. GRIZZLY

MAN could hardly imagine a more desperate plight than that in which Jack found himself.

He looked down-stream. The only exit from the trap in that direction was by water—not an attractive option considering the swiftness of the water and the deep undercurrents that swirled round the base of the stone column at the mouth of the horse-shoe. Up-stream, the path was completely occupied by the bear. An axe, a shovel, and one or two smaller tools were the only weapons at hand. But even these would be of no use in combat with a grizzly unless at close quarters. And who wants to come to close quarters with such a creature? One blow from one of those heavy paws would shatter the shaft of any axe; to use the shovel against such a solid body would be like patting a volcano with a teaspoon.

The young rancher then searched the face

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of the cliff with eager eyes. But he knew before that there was no hope for him in that direction. Lacking ropes or ladders, it was inaccessible even to a monkey. Again he looked at the water. That must be a last resort. Jack knew of the rapids below, which were the cause of the swiftness of the current here. He had seen great logs of wood broken to matchwood therein. He had no wish to test the quality of his ribs in the same mill. Still, even the rapids would be little more risky than a hand-to-hand encounter with a grizzly.

The bear was in no hurry. Man seemed to be a new experience in its hunting career. He was something worth studying. So he remained crouched upon the sand, watching with intent interest each of Munroe's movements, though now and then reminding the rancher of a visitor's presence by means of a low growl.

For some time a state of mutual inspection followed. There seemed to be nothing else to do. The actions of one must depend on the actions of the other. Man and beast—each was waiting for the other to make the first move, just as wrestlers wait for one another in order to get the telling grip. It was a case of testing one another's patience.

At last the grizzly showed signs of action.

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Slowly he rose, turned his head from one side to the other, advanced a couple of paces, then crouched again.

What was to be done?

It was impossible to pass the animal by the only path from the trap. It seemed equally impossible to attempt any form of attack that would not be suicidal.

Having no other choice, Jack retired to where his implements were heaped. There was a woodman's axe. That was better than nothing. He grasped the handle and experienced a certain sense of security.

"Now then, you brute!" he exclaimed. "If you mean to fight, come on and get it over!"

Was it a challenge?

Grizzly seemed to think so, for he immediately raised his ponderous body and began to waddle to the fray.

Munroe entrenched himself behind the slight barricade that the sluice afforded. At this crisis his fighting spirit was beginning to manifest itself. What little fear he had recently entertained was now dispelled by the inevitableness of battle. When one is face to face with danger, then one understands the stuff that one is made of.

The bear advanced slowly. Jack passed the

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axe to his left hand, seized a small tomahawk and sent it hurtling to the enemy. The aim was faulty, and only the handle struck. But it had this effect : it enlightened the animal to the fact that war had been declared without any doubt : resistance was to be offered.

Wild animals seldom care to attack unless resistance be given. To tear the flesh of the dead or helpless is little pleasure unless they have first had the delight of slaying. The conquest of the struggling is, to wild nature, something that whets the appetite. They love the chase and the duel of muscle, teeth and claw. Only stress of hunger will drive the carnivorous to gorge on an already slaughtered prey. But starvation might move a mouse to face a tiger.

The grizzly advanced with a slow, swinging gait—head hung low between the shoulders, jaws wide open and dripping moisture, eyes fixed fiercely upon the figure that stood steadily waiting to receive him.

Jack retreated a pace or two from the little rampart. Still the bear advanced, seeming by the very slowness of the advance to boast of the ease with which he would conquer. There was no fear in his movements. He knew the strength of his jaws and arms. Surely that frail creature in front of him

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would be a play-time victim of a play-time contest !

Reaching the sluice, the grizzly stopped. He examined the obstacle with signs of displeasure. Possibly, in his many wanderings, he had met with the traps which white men set in the forest. Possibly he had seen another of his kin caught therein. Was this another of those strange engines? He examined it carefully with loud sniffs and growls of disapproval. Then a fit of anger seized him. He fell upon the woodwork with tooth and claw, and it was but a few minutes before the labour of hours was utterly wrecked.

Seeing an opportunity for attack while the animal's attention was thus diverted from himself, Jack sprang forward and swung the axe with all his force. He aimed for the head, and hoped to deal a deadly blow on the brain. But the rancher did not reckon with the thick growth of hair that protected a skull that was as hard as metal. The axe struck, but the wound was slight since the blade was turned aside by the protective covering.

Jack Munroe jumped back to a safe distance at once. Infuriated by the blow, the grizzly now rose upon his hind legs and uttered a roar of fury.

Have you ever heard the roar of a bear?

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Oh, yes—when the creature has been safe behind the bars of a cage, and the utterance has been but a slight expression of irritation. But a furious bear, in its native environment! Like the war-whoop of an Indian, it is a sound that chills you to the very marrow of your bones. It seems to flood the forest with terror, and sets every little twig vibrating with fear. The valleys echo it, and it chases up every ravine like a very serpent of sound.

But terrible though that sound may be when heard during the ordinary hunt, how much more horrifying it must be when you stand but a few feet from the animal itself—face to face with six feet high of fury; the foetid breath reaching your nostrils—your only defensive weapon an axe, and—no possibility for escape?

Jack stood his ground.

Was he afraid now?

He had no time in which to think of fear or bravery. Seconds were flashing past him with crimson wings. He thought not of art nor craft. His “back was to the wall.” When men fight for their lives, reason is bereft them and madness is in their veins.

The bear lunged forward. He hoped to end the combat by one swing of the arm that

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could crack a man's skull as we break an eggshell. Jack sprang to one side, avoided the blow, swung the axe and inflicted a deep wound in one of the paws.

A roar of agony followed this telling blow. For a few seconds the bear folded the wounded paw on its breast beneath the other arm just like a child who has burnt his hand. Next moment it had again wheeled upon its enemy with arms outstretched to grip him. Once more Jack struck. Again blood was drawn. But now, with the heat of battle, pain was unheeded. The grizzly pranced upon the sandy beach and strove to reach the foe.

Jack now found himself at a greater disadvantage than ever. Dreading to get between the bear and the cliff, he was now between the animal and the deep pool of swirling water, and all his efforts to regain solid "fighting-ground" were fruitless. He could not hope to drive his enemy back. He himself was forced to go farther into the river until he was knee-deep in water.

The position was critical—between certain death of a most appalling description, or the more gentle welcome of a maze of swirling currents. Which should he choose? He was reluctant to yield to either, but necessity was urging beyond question or dispute.

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Then Jack laughed. (We do extraordinary things at extreme moments!)

“ One more swipe at you, you brute, and then—I’ll chance it! ” he cried.

He swung the axe, let it fly from his hands, and he had just time to see the steel head plunge into the grizzly’s stomach before he let himself fall backwards into the water.

CHAPTER XII

THE HUDSON TRAIL

BUT we must not forget the two friends whom we left in the little shanty about six miles north of Regina. Rory Stocks was a man of determination, and once he had made up his mind concerning any matter, he never delayed long in following that decision with suitable actions.

In the present instance he decided that no reasonable time must be lost in putting Munroe upon his guard against the threatened danger; so preparations were at once started with a view to setting out on the following day.

Of course the quickest method to reach Serpent Creek was to take train to Saskatoon in the first place and ride the rest of the distance. That was Fred's suggestion, though the man set the proposition aside at once.

“ Little Wolf won't be taking any trains.”

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“ But surely he won’t be walking a hundred and fifty miles? ” Holmes questioned.

“ Not if he can steal a broncho,” was the trapper’s opinion. “ A little matter of horse-stealing will be nothing new to Shontayeega. But I guess my bay mare, and the one that Keal will lend us—they’ll make as good time over the prairie as any others.”

“ Still,” said Fred thoughtfully, “ do you know I don’t quite see why we should not put the whole thing in the hands of the Mounted Police at once. Of course, I don’t mean that we should back out of the business. I want to do my share as much as ever. But surely the police would know exactly what to do, better than we do? ”

A curious look of amusement came into Rory’s eyes as he listened to the last expression of opinion.

“ Maybe they would,” he returned. “ I see you’re one of these coons who believe every man to his own trade. But I shouldn’t worry too much, if I were you——”

“ Oh, I’m not worrying! ” was Fred’s slightly “ huffish ” rejoinder.

“ Think we can’t tackle a pair of skunks like Little Wolf and his white-haired friend? ” then remarked Rory quizzingly.

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"No. That was not exactly my idea," said Fred. "But this seems so much a regular police job——"

"Oh, make your mind easy on that," laughed the man. "If you want to see the police in the shooting-match, you'll see them there in good time—all in good time, sonny."

"I'm easy. I leave it to you," said the boy resignedly. Then he remarked with a good-humoured smile: "I suppose it wouldn't do for me to inquire what's going to happen about grub, for I suppose we'll be out of reach of houses for two or three days?"

"That's so. But I guess a dipper or two of flour and a pinch of salt at the side of your saddle will do to go on with. And the living prairie all round you--ain't that enough for extras?"

Holmes smiled at the prospect of such rough-and-ready feeding, but he did not want the trapper to think that he was not as fit to rough it as anyone else.

"Right you are," he agreed cheerfully. "As I said, you know best."

"You can just about trust this old fox of the prairie to find his grub at nightfall. So long as he has a cartridge in his belt and a square foot of grass to hunt in—well, you can bet your bottom dollar that you'll need to

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slacken your belt before you roll yourself in your blanket for the night.

“ Now, just let’s reckon this thing out proper—there’s Fan and Meg, the two mares; there’s my rifle and a shot-gun (we’ll carry one each); there’s a pair of revolvers (not that we’ll need them, but it keeps one from thinking he’s out on a picnic); there’s the flour, a blanket each, a lariat (I’ll carry that), and a pair of picket-ropes. Then we’ll want a couple of mugs, besides the two riding; a billy-can; and—that’s about all. I’ve got my sheath-knife, and I guess I can hustle up another for you. Anything else you can think of? ”

“ A—tent? ” suggested Fred meekly.

But the boy’s humility of tone was wasted. The trapper gaped at him in utter amazement; then he laid his pipe on the table with deliberation, and afterwards turned to Holmes with a face like that of a judge and planted his hand emphatically on his knees.

“ Look here, my fine bantam! ” he began. “ Do you reckon that scouting after Shontayeega is the same as a birthday treat, or an ice-cream social, or even a Sunday School outing? Are we two able-bodied hulks of breathing humanity going out berry-picking, or are we out to nip the head and tail from the

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dirtiest bit of half-breed's trickery that ever breathed a mortal breath on this 'ere verdant prairie? Are we town-bred, store-collared, silk-scarfed, patent-shod, side-walk dandies, or just plain Rory Stocks and Frederick Holmes going about their business? That's what I want to know! Now, are we?"

"Are we what?" asked Fred with a twinkle of the teasing-spirit in the corner of his eye. "Are we what?"

"Well,—just as I was saying."

"Sorry, old chap. I didn't quite follow. Would you mind saying it all over again?" was the lad's quiet answer.

"Say it—again?" gasped the trapper sitting bolt upright. "Say——" Then a roar of laughter broke from Rory's huge lungs, choking immediate speech. "Bully for you, younker! You're just a coon after my own heart. Make a joke; take a joke! That's my motto for a happy life. Now, you just make yourself at home till I come back. I'm going over to see Sam Keal about looking after my cow, etcetera. He'll be glad to have the cow, by the way, for his wife's just had twins and his own milk cow broke her neck last week trying to lick flies from the bottom of a bridge by standing on the top to reach them. Shucks! Cows haven't got sense

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enough for anything. They'd just as soon lick a steam-saw as a turnip top."

Rory was as good as his word. All arrangements for the journey were made that afternoon with the intention of making an early start on the following morning. Certain unanticipated events, however, delayed the start until mid-day. Then the shanty was locked, and the key handed to the waiting Keal who had come to witness the departure.

"You can expect us when you see us," laughed Stocks, as he swung into the saddle and tickled the mare with the big rowels of his Mexican spurs. Then the riders set off at a gentle canter—Fred's first ride on a prairie trail.

Apart from playing musical chairs on the stars with a monoplane, there can be few forms of open air exercise to equal that of scampering over the prairie on the back of a well-behaved broncho. Trotting, by the way, is a mode of progression that no self-respecting steed of the prairie ever indulges in. He would no sooner think of allowing a man to bob up and down on his back than he would of wearing top-boots. His form of movement (when ridden) is something between an amble and a canter with a pinch of gallop thrown in. You sit as easy on his back as though you

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were in an arm-chair. Give him a free rein and he will carry you at that gait for a distance of miles that would cause the mane and tail of your cavalryman's charger to stand up on end with horror. There is no "show off" about a broncho. His aim is to "get there." He fairly kicks the prairie behind him to achieve that purpose.

And the mellow air that sings past your ears and rushes into your lungs! Straight from the Rockies, from the Arctic, from the Golden South it has come. 'Tis the nectar of the gods, ye stay-at-homes in murky towns! 'Tis the elixir that changes puny boys into lusty men who glory that they are living.

These were somewhat the thoughts of Fred that afternoon. He did not put them into so many words, perhaps; but none the less such was the experience and the feeling. He began to feel that he was really living. Possibly it was worth having known a city street in order to be able to realise the comparison.

Breaking the canter to a walk at intervals, the ground was covered in good time until at last, the two riders reached the brow of the Qu'appelle Valley. That was about dusk. The little town of Lumsden was in sight as it nestled among the maples in the bosom of the vale. But Rory decided that an open-air

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camp would be the better as he did not wish to draw attention to his movements. His was a familiar figure—how familiar he did not consider it necessary to advise Holmes at the time. There were many who might wonder why he was travelling north in company with a boy. He did not wish this. Prairie towns have ears and tongues. Little Wolf was the sort of person to have friends in every hollow; so Stocks judged rightly that all his plans might be defeated if a whisper of his movements reached the hearing of the renegade Chippeway.

The camp was pitched on the old historic ground where the redmen for centuries were wont to pass the winter months. In a spacious clearing, encircled by a dense growth of berry shrub and maple trees—at the fork of the Qu'appelle and Pile-o'-Bones—there the travellers picketed their horses, ate their supper, rolled themselves in their blankets, laid their heads in the hollows of inverted saddles, and slept to the lullaby of tinkling waters mingled with the calls of nocturnal creatures.

Then, up betimes in the morning, the journey was resumed. The gun provided meat, the flour provided "damper," the air provided sauce. There were no adventures,

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though the experience was a delight to Fred.

At last, on the fourth evening, the thick woods that border some parts of the Saskatchewan River were sighted.

Until now, very little had been said during the journey in connection with the mission on which the friends were embarked. Coming within distant view of Saskatoon, however, Rory called a halt.

"I don't reckon that you're just pining for the sight of houses and streets?" he remarked by way of announcing the fact that he was quite disinclined for such pleasure.

Fred held up one of his none too clean hands with an action of self-commiseration.

"A bath wouldn't be at all unwelcome," he said. "The little springs that have supplied our coffee water have done little more than allow a slight polish to the tip of my nose. Still, if a 'sight,' is all that we are to have, I am quite contented with a distant view. The sight of streets and houses won't wash a fellow any more than somebody-or-other's soap declines to wash clothes."

"Good," was the satisfied response. "You can have as much washing as ever you like when we strike the Saskatchewan. I guess there's enough water there to wash all the

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critturs that ever went into the ark. But say, sonny! You ought to have a medal!"

"For what?" asked Holmes, though he knew well enough by the expression on his friend's face that chaffing was the order of the moment.

"For being a freak," was the complimentary response. "I guess you're the first boy on record who wasn't contented to go without water for a month!"

"On record—in *Canada*, perhaps," returned Fred sarcastically. "You see, I happen to be an English boy. Now, in England we are famed for——"

"I know—Nelson at Waterloo! He died, no doubt, washing himself there and said, 'England expects every man to do his duty.' It seems they couldn't have been mighty keen on it before," the trapper interrupted with good humour and equally good invention. "But we'll let it go at that. Now, I was thinking that we must make a bee-line from here for Serpent Creek. I wouldn't like to bet my life that I know the shortest cut from here. This is a bit out of my usual way. I usually hit the Creek from the north side of the river. But I guess we ought to hit it about due north."

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“ Which way are we heading now? ”

“ Somewhere north-west. The river goes north for a bit, then bends to the east. It's somewhere about that bend that Serpent Creek branches off. Munroe's shack is about ten miles up the Creek—above a cataract. There's a goodish cataract before the Serpent joins the Saskatchewan.”

Fred sighed with mock weariness.

“ It all sounds like a bit out of a geography book at school——”

“ And what else is it? ” the trapper quickly demanded. “ It's a bit out of the best of books—the Book of Nature in the school of life—and don't you forget it! Give me that book for real interest. Spring, summer, autumn, winter—it has always got new pages for you.”

“ I wonder how I shall like the winter,” remarked Holmes, tactfully trying to cut short the sermon. “ They say it's awfully cold.”

“ A little bit. Now and then the words freeze as they come out of your mouth, and you've got to thaw them on the frying-pan before you know what they mean. Barring that, it's not so bad. But we'd better be getting a gait on if we don't mean to stay here as statues of beauty.”

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Wheeling his broncho to the right, Rory set the pace. Fred was quickly at his side, smiling to himself at the trapper's rough humour, and wondering what would be the end of this forced expedition.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE VALLEY OF GHOSTS

SHONTAYEEGA had made the most of his time. He had had over twenty-four hours' start of Rory and Fred while (as the former had surmised as being probable) a "borrowed" steed had helped him well on his way.

Every inch of the north plains was familiar ground to the Indian. That was an asset to success that was denied even to Stocks the renowned voyageur. He did not follow the old freighter's trail which was the common route before the institution of the Saskatoon railway. That was the path that his pursuers adopted, though, of course, Shontayeega had no notion that he was being pursued. All he knew was that the secret had possibly been overheard and understood by the boy. His business now was to make all speed to carry out his instructions. The subsequent details he would leave to the genius of the Gold-finder.

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Allowing very little time for sleep, and being unsparing of horse-flesh since the unfortunate animal was not his own property, the Chippeway pressed onward with all speed. Not for a moment did he doubt the success of his errand. He had every faith in the cunning of Curtis Newnes. The assayer had been generous in rewarding him in the past, according to a redskin's estimate of generosity. What had been promised had been, apparently, fulfilled. Thus it never occurred to the Indian to doubt that real wealth awaited him at the dreaded Serpent Creek. So greed stirred the wings of haste. For gold Little Wolf would have readily risked both life and limb.

It is wonderful how easy it is to defy the darkness when we are basking in the sunshine. We can easily brave legions in a time of peace.

These were points of view which Shontayeega began to appreciate presently. He was ready enough to defy superstition so long as he was on the open prairie—many miles distant from his destination. But, in time, he forded the Saskatchewan and left the spacious plains behind him. Then his eyes began to dart from side to side with suspicious glances as he rode. The alertness of fear was in his

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heart. He would start at the slightest sound. Even the familiar cry of the gopher as he darted into his subterranean home sometimes caused the redman's blood to run cold.

Yet he pressed forward with perseverance.

At last he reached the brow of the Creek and descended into the shade of a ravine until he reached the bed of the valley and, ultimately, the bank of the river. There he parted company with his borrowed steed. The rest of the journey must be made on foot. The bush must form a shelter for the man of evil. His path was no path for an honest broncho.

Stealthily Little Wolf now began to follow up the course of the river. He knew the ways of white men in the planning of their homes. He rightly judged that, if a white settler was in the valley, his home would not be far from the water. That was why he commenced his investigations from nearly the mouth of the Creek. By following upwards, he felt certain that the white man's tepee would be found.

Keenly engrossed by the instinctive love of woodcraft, yet at the same time ever apprehensive of some terrible dangers which his superstition imagined were all around him, Little Wolf crept from tree to tree, bush to bush.

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Once a fox started from its cover and leapt with a yelp of fear into the thickness of the bush.

Little Wolf pulled up with a jerk, and the sweat started to his forehead. It is truly remarkable to what an extent superstition will warp some people's natures. At other times and in other regions, there was no sound or sight of the forest that would surprise Shontayeega. He would have met the appearance of a mountain lion without the quiver of a muscle or the catching of a breath.

But to-day, the Indian was another being.

Who could tell what evil spirit might not have taken the form of that startled fox? Who knew but that yelp might not have been a cry to rouse other evil spirits against which mortal man would be helpless?

The Chippeway saw ghosts in every gnarled trunk; ghouls in every little feathered body.

Parched with fear that kept him continually pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth, the Indian sought the river where he might slake his thirst and bathe his hot face.

He found a place where the trees opened to allow the presence of a small meadow of long grass that sloped straight to the margin of the water. Thither Little Wolf turned his steps. But he kept his blanket drawn tightly

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round him, and he did not cease to look furtively from side to side, in terror for what might spring upon him from the bush at either hand.

He hurried forward. A rattlesnake started his danger signal, and the Indian thought it was the trembling of mountains. A chipmunk scuttled with shrill chirruping, and he thought it was the voice of doom.

Then, at his very feet, came the moan of some terrible demon. The redskin stopped, frozen to the spot by terror.

He looked down.

Yes—there at his feet lay the figure of a man—a white man—with the face—

Oh, horror! It was the face of him whose arm had shielded the woman that night among the burning ruins in Regina!

Of a truth this was the region of demons. They could take the likeness of any friend or foe!

One glance at the supposed apparition was enough. Little Wolf did not wait for a second look, nor did the water any longer tempt his thirsty tongue. He uttered a yell of terror, and, turning, fled back again to the seclusion of the wood.

The red man was now almost distraught with fear.

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Heedless of all caution, utterly forgetful of his mission, he rushed blindly onwards. He had but one definite aim now—to put distance between himself and that terrible region of evil spirits—that region where ghosts could even take the forms of foxes or human beings.

Quite mad with terror, the Indian tore his way through the bulwarks of thorn and vine. His blanket was left clinging to a bush; his clothes were torn to rags. But he cared not. Though his flesh was lacerated and the blood was streaming from his limbs, he did not seem to be alive to pain. Fear was all that he knew—fear for that ghastly face that was lying upon the grass by the river-side.

He stumbled; but he was up again like a deer.

Out from his path scuttled rabbits and chipmunks. The red-breast flew screaming in terror from the twig; the Baltimore dived into his stocking nest of silver flax and crouched, quivering and dumb, until the wild crying creature had passed.

Still he plunged on—falling, scrambling, tearing at branch and creeper as a wild beast tears at the bars of its cage or the cordage of a trap.

Then once more he fell. It was a small

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oasis of grass that he had reached, and as he was panting and exhausted he could not immediately rise.

The soft coolness was refreshment to the shattered frame. He lay for some time to gather strength, and, lying there, some of his scattered faculties began to creep back to him.

At last he struggled to his knees. The ground yielded slightly, but to this his dazed senses paid little heed. Slowly he attempted to rise. He placed one sole on the ground and then another. Then, as he stretched to his full height the meagre coating of turf gave way. In an instant the Indian had sunk to his knees in clinging mud.

He was in the grip of a muskeg.¹

It needed no length of time for Little Wolf to realise his plight. He knew the relentless power of the muskeg. He had seen a herd of horses sink into one of these nature-traps never to be heard of again.

He bent forward to fling himself upon his face; but the mud clung to him like the arms of an octopus. It was slowly dragging him down to black depths. There was no escape from those terrible arms.

Down ! Down !

¹ A spring which forms a pit of mud, on the surface of which the turf is very green, but thin.

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The clinging mud crept up the man's limbs until it reached his waist.

That creeping death was maddening. Something sure and swift he might have borne with bravery, even under such terrible circumstances; but the slow, inch-by-inch mental torture was driving him frantic.

He struggled wildly, but the writhing only aided the pleasure of the torturer. It was just as if some great creature of darkness was sucking him into its ghastly maw.

Now the mud was beginning to press upon his ribs—now it was almost at his arms.

Poor Little Wolf filled the forest with his yells of terror. He cried upon the winds to save him; he wept appeals to the trees to bend their arms to his assistance.

But no help came. Steady was his descent; and the wild beasts fled to cover—terrified by the screaming of the doomed man.

Nothing now remained above that patch of smiling green but a terror-stricken face and a pair of clutching hands.

Then the cries became fewer, the head sank back; the hands fell listless.

Only once there came a moan—a feeble moan, and a faint thrill moved the fingers.

In a few minutes the grass smiled green and

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smooth once more, with naught to mark the place where a man had met his doom while on an errand of sin.

Thus did conscience slay evil, as evil must always be slain.

CHAPTER XIV

GREAT WHITE MEDICINE

THE young Indians had returned from the day's hunt to the camp which had been pitched at the mouth of Serpent Creek, though it was in the valley of the Saskatchewan at a safe distance from the vale of dread repute.

The day had been successful. Many chicken had fallen to the guns; more than one antelope had found that the ancient prowess of the Sioux was not altogether a story of the past, when the buffalo were wont to sweep across the prairie in a black mass as midges come in clouds to shadow the evening sun.

But there was a strange silence in the camp.

Usually, on such occasions, the shrill voices of the squaws and the laughter of the children as they crowded round the returned hunters filled the camp with life.

But to-day all was stilled.

The hunters entered the street of tents with-

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out receiving any words of greeting. The game was handed to the squaws with only whispered instructions. Then each man went to his teepee, where he lit his pipe and sat silently smoking by the flap of the tent.

Presently, from out of one of the larger wigwams, came a figure. He was an old man, though his massive frame was still erect, and his eye still flashed as clear as in boyhood. Watonyee—"Chief Man"—was his name. He was second in authority over the Sioux, only yielding his will to that of Neeumonya—"Walking Rain"—who lay stricken with fever within the royal teepee.

All the eyes of the camp were turned towards the old warrior as he issued from the tent. The women paused in the preparations of food; the men took their pipes from their mouths; the papooses ceased their whispered games. As the heads of grain are bent by the breeze, so all faces turned in one direction to Watonyee with appealing eyes, though expressionless faces.

Chief Man strode forward with bowed head. He, alone, of all the camp allowed himself any outward show of grief.

He reached the open space in the centre of the teepees. There he stopped, turned, and faced the setting sun with head erect.

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For some time the old man stood there in immobile silence—the observed of all eyes.

At last he spoke. The utterance was low, but the deep bass tones reached the ears of all the camp like the sound of whispered thunder.

“Brothers, he sleeps—the mighty Neeumonya sleeps. Will he wake again to see another sun? Will Walking Rain see again the prairie where he has done great deeds—where he slew the last buffalo—where he struck down the false Chippeway and drove their young men to seek the white man’s shelter? Will he again rule the sun-dance or taste the white dog feast? Will he ever speak again—he whose voice was mighty in the days before the white man came to take our land?”

The speaker paused. The flutter of a leaf might have been heard if such had ventured to break the sad silence of that camp of mourning.

Presently he resumed :

“She—the Great White Medicine—who is ever friend to the red man, and who came to our call by the great fire-horse—swift as the wings of the wind—she has done great medicine. Neeumonya sleeps, my brothers! The fire has left him for a time. He sleeps.”

Again followed a pause; once more that impressive silence.

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“ But Great White Medicine say to Watonyee : ‘ Much medicine can I do ; but great medicine can be done by the brave men of the Sioux. Walking Rain sleeps. I have driven the fire from his body for the night. But go you, Chief Man, out into the camp. Let there be peace in the teepees. Let no sound disturb the sleep that I have brought. And do you, O Watonyee—you and your hunters, your squaws and papooses—call upon the great Manito ! Ask Him that Walking Rain may not pass to the Happy Hunting-ground this night. It may be His will to grant what you ask.’ ”

For the third time the speaker paused, and, as he did so, with one accord all those in the camp rose to their feet and turned their faces towards the crimson sun.

Three words did Chief Man speak :

“ Manito ! Spare Neeumonya ! ”

And the silence that followed these words showed how that silent appeal was being echoed in a hundred hearts, as they sent that one thought to Him Whose power alone could save the life of the stricken Neeumonya.

While the multitude was waiting thus in a transport of dumb emotion, there came echoing from the hollows of Serpent Creek a wail so terrible in its wild sadness that even Chief

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Man felt his limbs quiver with a nameless dread.

A shudder ran through all the camp. It seemed, as the cry reached their ears, that the dismal wailing swept round every teepee, as circles the forerunning breeze of a blizzard.

The papooses ran to their mothers and clung terrified to the maternal skirts. The men turned blanched faces to one another, and asked mute questions with eyes that spoke absolute fear.

Alone stood Chief Man. His limbs were shaking, but he denied his face the expression of any emotion. He turned to no one. His eyes were still fixed upon the sun, and, although the wails were repeated at intervals and the camp quivered at the sounds, Chief Man stood firm as a rock.

The flap of the royal teepee was raised, and a white woman passed out, wondering surprise on her face. She hastened to Chief Man's side, and asked in awestruck tones :

"What is that, Chief Man? What is that terrible crying?"

The Indian did not turn.

"The spirit of Serpent Creek has fled," he said. "We asked of Manito to spare Neeumonya, and He has sent the evil spirit

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back to its lodge. Our chief will live, Great White Medicine ! ”

“ Yes,” the woman replied quietly. “ I think Walking Rain will live, but——”

The speech was cut short, for again came that terrible cry—once, twice, thrice, and then—deathly silence.

“ Bad medicine is in Serpent Creek,” murmured Chief Man, and a slight moan from the squaws gave agreement to his thoughts.

But the white woman broke upon these thoughts with an impatience which was startling to these superstitious folk.

“ Fools ! Blind idiots ! That is not the cry of a spirit. It is the cry of someone in pain—in terrible agony ! ”

“ ’Tis the death-wail of the conquered,” said Chief Man. “ We called upon Manito to save Neeumonya, and——”

“ And He has answered by telling you to do a like service. Listen, Chief Man ! It is nonsense ; it is all wrong about evil spirits in Serpent Creek. There are no evil spirits that lie there. Evil only lives in our own hearts. That was the cry of a brother—perhaps a white brother—in great pain. Do you think that I—a doctor (Great White Medicine you call me)—do you think that I do not know such things

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when I hear them? You must go—you and your men must search the valley! ”

The Indian shook his head, and there were mutters in the camp indicating the impossibility of such a suggestion.

“ The red men love Great White Medicine as they love their chief. For Great White Medicine they would do great deeds; they would face great dangers. But what man can fight with the spirits of evil that use not burning arrow or knife, but who kill with a breath of fire and torture with a look? ”

“ Tuts! ” The woman was getting beyond all patience. “ You are cowards, every one of you—cowards like the half-breeds who only fight like the wolves—when there are many to one! ”

Chief Man did not answer that bitter speech, but he turned for the first time and looked at the woman. Then he smiled, just as one might smile at the words of a foolish child. He next took a few paces across the clearing, bent down and picked a glowing torch from the chief camp fire. Without uttering a word, he bared his left arm, placed the red brand upon it, and then turned a proud face to the white woman again while the steam rose from the sizzling flesh. Then he flung the torch back into the fire, and let his arm

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hang at his side with an action of indifference.

That was his answer to the charge of cowardice, and the woman was ashamed of the rash charge she had made.

“ I am wrong, Chief Man,” she said. “ But you, too, are wrong still if you trust not Manito in all things. You *must* send your men into the Serpent Valley ! ”

Yet the Indian was unconvinced.

“ No man go into Serpent Creek and live,” he said.

The woman was now at her wits' end.

“ Oh, no; believe me, you are wrong! Have you ever known me to speak words that were not true? And think you that if I do great medicine I do not know of what I speak? But we pale-faces do not love to boast of our deeds. Yet, Chief Man, I must call to your mind that I have done much for your people. I would ask you not to forget what I have done for your chief this day. To save red men from sickness, I have refused much gold in the towns of the white men. Many snows have come and gone, and yet, when the red man has called, has White Medicine ever refused to answer? Has she turned deaf ears to the call? Has she not crossed the prairie in the face of the blizzard and the fire? Has she not done

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all these things for the sake of her red brothers? ”

“ It is the truth that Great White Medicine speaks,” returned the old man.

“ Then, if it is the truth, will you not do one thing for me? ” the woman persisted.

“ We dare not enter Serpent Creek,” was the low reply.

That was enough. The doctor turned sharply and addressed a young Indian who stood near.

“ My horse is picketed beyond that thicket. Bring him to me! ”

The Indian did not obey immediately.

“ Do you hear me? Bring me my horse at once while I go to the teepee for my cloak! ” the woman commanded. Then with a sneer: “ Or perhaps it is that the Indian is so cowardly that he will not enter *any* bush at dusk? The stranger must bring her own horse.”

“ No, it is not——”

“ Don’t talk to me! ” was the angry interruption. “ If you refuse, I shall go myself. I stay no longer in the tents of cowards.”

The camp was stirred to speech at last. All began to crowd round the woman with various words of pleading remonstrance.

“ You will not leave us? ”

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“ Great White Medicine will not leave our chief? ”

“ The mighty Walking Rain will die ! ”

The woman listened sternly until there was silence sufficient for her words to be heard distinctly by all.

“ Bring me my horse ! I return now to Saskatoon ! ” she said.

“ And Neeumonya ? ”

“ Will be glad to die when he knows that the Sioux have become weak and cowardly ! ”

White Medicine conquered. The young man did not bring the horse, for Chief Man sent his orders ringing through the camp :

“ Brothers ! Heed the words of Great White Medicine ! Hear the word of Watonyee ! Spread into the shadows of Serpent Creek. White Medicine would not lie in the Name of the Great Spirit. Manito will go with us. The power of evil is bound with strongest leather when the Great Spirit leads ! ”

CHAPTER XV

FRIENDLY HANDS

UNDER the command of Chief Man, a detachment of Indians proceeded to the mouth of Serpent Creek. There they spread out to form a line that reached entirely across the valley, whereupon they commenced a steady march that was calculated to beat every inch of the district as they progressed towards the source of this tributary to the Saskatchewan.

The sun had set by this time. As a rule, the Indian pursues no hunting or marching after sundown unless the need is one of exceptional urgency. But, when necessity demands, he has senses of sight and hearing that enable him to track in the deepest forest with the unerring instinct of a panther.

Although many of the men were within speaking distance of one another, no words were exchanged. Half-crouched, so that their eyes could scan the ground, they advanced with the noiselessness of spectres.

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Afraid? Yes. There was not one of them who was not anticipating evil at every step. They still dreaded the unknown. But the words of White Medicine and the orders of the deputy chief had convinced them that it was their duty to risk all danger at this time. All the same, they were all convinced that, sooner or later, their eyes would witness some horror.

We must not be surprised that superstition should have such a hold upon these men. Nor ought we to blame them for their foolishness. Remember, Serpent Creek had been a shunned region so far back as the mind of living man could recall, and so long as legendary lore recorded. It was little wonder that their hearts failed them as they took the first plunge into the supposed home of all that was evil—they, the first human beings (as they believed) to voluntarily brave such certain danger.

Yet, so strong are the Indian's reverence for authority and respect for old age that not one refused to obey the order that night.

For a considerable time they pressed forward without succeeding in finding any signs to indicate the cause of that cry of distress. The night closed in darkly, and the searchers had to bend to the very ground while examining possible tracks. The hunt now resembled the

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night-prowling of four-footed packs more than that of men.

At last one of the redskins gave a slight cry to announce a discovery. The human line paused, and Chief Man hastened to the discoverer. He had found the blanket which had been torn from the fleeing Shontayeega.

But this alone gave little clue to enlighten the searchers. It was enough, however, to tell them that they were on the right track. Chief Man gave the order to resume (he taking charge of the robe), and once more the line of patient searchers dropped on their knees to search the ground with sensitive fingers, since now the darkness quite prevented the use of eyes.

Creeping like animals, they soon found the indentations of a moccasined foot, and more than once an Indian raised his head with nostrils distended as he sniffed the air. He had scented blood !

It was slow work ; but that very slowness was unerring. On the men crept, until at last they came to a patch of soft green grass. Here they paused. The pressure of the advancing hand told them that the ground was treacherous. Even in the darkness of the night they were not to be trapped as the frantic Shontayeega had been trapped in the day. The readily yielding

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turf instantly told the trackers that further straight advance was impossible.

But the tracks which they were following *had* advanced in a direct line to the centre of the grass! That puzzled the Indians. What manner of man was it who had ventured to walk right to the middle of a muskeg?

They cautiously crept round the margin. Fingers moving like the claws of great spiders touched every minute portion of grass and earth, but no fresh imprints were there. They only found the tracks leading straight into the muskeg. By these signs they knew that someone had perished there.

This news was quickly communicated to Chief Man. But just as that message was announced, there came a call intimating another discovery.

Other searchers had found a man—a white man—lying helpless and unconscious in the grass at a few yards' distance from the river. They had arrived just in time to drive away a pair of timber wolves that were smelling the prostrate body, wondering if it were yet time to bare their fangs.

Chief Man knelt down and slightly raised the lifeless figure. As he did so, a faint moan came from the pale-face.

“Manito is good,” said the old Indian

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reverently. "Manito is good to let the red man save a life in return for the life of Walking Rain. Brothers—Great White Medicine speak *true* words this day. No evil spirits dwell in Serpent Creek! Only Manito is here!"

It was too dark to see in what state the helpless man was. All the Indians could discern was that the sufferer was indeed a white man.

"The pale-face is wet," resumed Chief Man, running his hand over the limp limbs. "His clothes are torn and his flesh is wounded. We must take him to the tents of the Sioux that Great White Medicine may work more wonders with the cloths and the waters that heal."

It is no rare experience in the lives of these prairie-wanderers to have to minister to the wounded and helpless, and the hands were gentle as women's as they raised Munroe (for such, of course, the reader has recognised him), and laid him upon a blanket which one of the men discarded for the purpose. Several of the strongest men then gripped the edges and raised the burden shoulder high so that it rested on a firm, though easy, platform of cloth.

There was no need to search farther. Of

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course the Indians were still mystified. Indian ears had not been deceived by an Indian voice. All knew that the cries which had reached the camp were not those from the burden that they were carrying. They knew that the voice had been one of their own race. Moreover, they were satisfied that it was the voice of him whose terrible end had been the hospitality of the muskeg. But why the white man had been lying there helpless on the grass; why an Indian's tracks should lead from that white man to the muskeg; why any Indian should have allowed himself to be engulfed in such a familiar trap that would not have deceived a toddling papoose? These were questions to which they could guess no answers.

It was after midnight when the rescuers returned to the camp, though runners had been sent ahead to advise White Medicine of the results of the search.

With the promptness of one who had been well trained to deal with all medical emergencies, the woman met the bearers and instructed them to lay the patient by the glow of the camp fire.

In an instant the sufferer was recognised. The doctor knew the rancher for him whose right arm had defended her but a little time since, and she marvelled how almost prophetic

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had been her offer of service if ever the future provided the opportunity for rendering the same.

Poor Munroe was beyond recognising anybody. He lay white and helpless where the Indians had deposited him. The only signs of life were slight moans now and then, as Mrs Rothwell deftly examined him to find the extent of the injuries.

As far as she could tell in the circumstances, the doctor believed that the injuries were not very serious. The unconsciousness appeared to be due to exhaustion more than wounds. Chief Man readily offered his teepee to be used as a hospital and his best fur robes for a bed; and when the patient had been made as comfortable as the circumstances would allow, Mrs Rothwell took the old man aside.

"Chief Man," she said, with that sweet smile which had endeared her so much to the Indians to whose welfare she devoted her life—"Chief Man, the bravery of your people has been rewarded. You have proved that the story of evil spirits is false; you have saved the life of a white brother; and—Neeumonya will live! Manito has heard your cry. While you were away the fire left the chief's body, and I know that he will live."

Then it was, for the first time, that

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Watonyee showed full emotion. He fell upon his knees before Great White Medicine. With both hands he threw dust upon his head in token of great humility, and then raised one of the lady's feet to rest upon the palm of his right hand.

"Great and mighty is Manito!" he rolled out in vibrating tones. "From this night the Sioux shall be the slaves of Great White Medicine to do her bidding, and the right hand of every Sioux shall be a hand to her service. Call, and the Sioux will come to her from the farthest prairie. No snow shall keep them; no forest shall hide them. On the wings of the wind shall they travel to obey the voice of their friend."

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Next morning Munroe opened his eyes for the first time. He was puzzled.

Was this his own shanty? If so, it had changed wonderfully in the night. Was this his own bed? If so, though comfortable enough, it had scarcely the feeling of smooth ease to which he was accustomed.

And that figure sitting huddled at his side? Surely it was an Indian? Then, what was an Indian doing in his shack? It was all very strange and very puzzling.

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He heard a voice addressing him. It seemed to reach him from somewhere far away in the distance.

"How do you feel now?" the voice was asking.

Jack greeted the question with a weak smile.

"I am very well, thank you. How are you? The weather has been most changeable lately."

Somehow, the sound of his voice and the words that he used seemed to be out of place. Indeed, they occurred to him as being somewhat comical. He did not know why. But at any rate he laughed, though he immediately pulled himself up, saying aloud:

"What a fatheaded thing to do—to laugh—at nothing—at a very ordinary answer to—a very ordinary question!"

"But you do feel better?" It was Mrs Rothwell who was speaking.

"Yes, thank you. I feel—strange—a little pain in my back; and my head—it's a bit queer, as if it were fastened on the wrong way——"

"And your leg?"

"That's all right. There's nothing the matter with my leg."

The patient then closed his eyes and

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remained slightly dozing for some time. Presently he again wakened. This time his brain seemed a little clearer.

"Do tell me where I am!" he pleaded.
"I don't understand at all."

"You are in the tent of Chief Man of the Sioux—at the camp by the mouth of Serpent Creek," Mrs Rothwell explained. "You have had an accident——"

"Yes, yes," was the hasty interruption.
"I remember now. I was working in the creek—then the grizzly—hand to hand—and the fall into the water—the cataract—the rocks—then I managed to—to crawl somewhere—to some bank; and then— But who are you? I seem to remember your face."

"I am Mrs Rothwell. You saved my life on the night of the cyclone——"

"Ah, yes! You were in the lake—no, that was someone else, that was—yes, it was Holmes. Where is Holmes?"

"Really, you ought to know better than I do," replied Mrs Rothwell pleasantly. "I left him with you."

"With me? With me?" The poor tired brain was still a little in a maze.

"Yes. Don't you remember? He went with you to the Maple House after you both escorted me."

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Jack wrinkled his brow with an effort to remember.

“ Yes; he ought to be here. My ranch is at Serpent Creek.”

“ Then, he will be at home! ” was the doctor’s decision. “ No doubt he is wondering what has become of you. We must send a messenger at once. I’ll write a note explaining.”

Then it was that remembrance came. Jack uttered a slight moan at the recollection, and Mrs Rothwell, thinking that the rancher was suffering afresh (as indeed he was), bent forward to ask kindly :

“ What is it? Are you in pain? I am a doctor, you know, and can help you.”

Jack raised his eyes to look into Mrs Rothwell’s with a sad smile.

“ Yes,” he said quietly, “ I am in pain—in great pain. But it is not the sort for doctor’s curing. It’s a sort of dull ache of the heart—the ache that a fellow has when he knows that he has been a cad, and knows that he can’t cure the harm that he has done.”

“ I shouldn’t say that if I were you,” commented Mrs Rothwell kindly. “ If one wants to put things right, one will be shown the way at the proper time.”

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“Do you think so?” There was eagerness of hope in the question.

“I am certain,” was the answer.

“Do you believe that—even though there had been a terrible quarrel—one that was the means of—of separating a fellow from the one he wanted for a friend—and when that fellow knows that he isn’t really fit to have such a friend? Do you believe it possible then?”

Of course, Mrs Rothwell could not have any idea to what Jack was referring. This much, however, she had no difficulty in understanding: that there had been a quarrel between the two boys, and that they had parted ways. But she gave the answer which she believed to be the right one.

“If we try to do right, I know that the way of right is shown to us. It may not be the one that we expect; but, if we try to understand, we can see that it *is* the right one, for all that. But we must not speak any more at present. You must try and rest quietly to-day. To-morrow we will arrange to carry you to your home, if it is not too far away. You are sure that you are not in much pain—that your leg does not hurt very much?”

“My leg?” Jack repeated the word in evident wonder.

“Yes; your—right leg?”

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“Not in the least. I don’t see why it should. My head and my back—yes; but my legs are all right. Goodness knows what would happen if my legs were injured. A rancher—with a game leg—he’d be a poor sort of a rancher, wouldn’t he?”

“Yes—a poor—rancher,” repeated Mrs Rothwell falteringly, as she turned away her face to hide the tears that were trembling on her eyelashes.

CHAPTER XVI

THROUGH THE BUSH

A CONSIDERABLE width of forest land borders the Saskatchewan in the vicinity of the old Hudson's Bay ford. This was the route which Stocks adopted.

This trail is little used in the present days. Time was when the trappers for that historic and romantic Company made it their regular path from the Qu'appelle Valley to the great northern lakes. The plains are scarred in every direction by such paths. They lead from the extreme north to the farthest south; from the utmost east to the extreme west. And even though years have passed since these highways were in regular use, so great was the ancient traffic that these caravan routes are still plainly recognisable. It is only when we see these paths still evident after nearly a century of disuse, that we realise how enormous must have been the traffic that was wont to cross the prairie on varied missions. They

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were worn bare by thousands of trappers in their "prairie yachts"¹ and sledges; by Indians on errands of peaceful trading; by war-parties out for bloody warfare—thousands of moccasins and horses' feet in the days of old kept these trails like brown ribbons that straggled from fort to fort across the boundless meadows of the northern plains.

To-day the Hudson's Bay trails are but mementoes of a past that is being quickly forgotten. Iron rails have diverted trade to other regions, or carved a straight path where foot could not pass. Isolated forts have become the centres of busy throngs of trades, of colleges—regions where the voices of nature have been replaced by the hum of machinery.

While we know that it is good for a people that they should advance in knowledge and the arts of civilisation, there is something rather sad in the turning over of the old romantic pages. We have hunted wild duck in ponds that have since been drained and formed the hub of a thriving town which boasts its city hall and university. We have seen an Indian sun-dance where to-day four railway systems meet. We have heard the woods ring with the yelps of quarrelling wolves where now the din of hammers on metal is never-ceasing.

¹ Small covered carts.

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Truly the old order changeth, and perhaps nowhere is that change more rapid than in Canada. But it is comforting to know that Canada is wide. There is still space and to spare in spite of the broad stream of human beings that pours upon that land of promise year after year. There are still miles of plain and forest where the foot of man (at least, the starched collar variety) have hardly trod. There are still lakes and woodlands known only to wandering Indians and white hunters who prefer the gun to the ploughshare, the tent to the roof of slate.

The forest was dark as the riders entered, for the sun had almost set. When a quarter of a mile had been covered into the woods the forest became a place of shadows and, soon afterwards, a realm of dungeon darkness.

To Fred, on his first ride by night in the backwoods, the feeling was an eerie one. He held the reins lightly, for it was impossible to guide the broncho correctly. Under such circumstances one has no option but to let the animal take its own way. This increases that feeling of mystery. So long as one can use the guiding hand one feels as though going somewhere. But when the broncho is the guide—then comes the sensation of belonging

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to nowhere. And there are so many things around you that you can hear but cannot see. At the side of your path you can hear the leaves suddenly rustle with the peculiar sound that indicates some wild creature startled from its cover. Your broncho is royally indifferent to such incidents, but you feel that it would be much more satisfactory to travel on that trail if you could only see as well as hear what it was that caused these leaves to rustle and these twigs to crack.

At intervals, little stars twinkle round about you. These are the fire-flies shining their lamps to beckon their mates. Suddenly your broncho stops and holds his head low as he snorts suspicion. If you are not an experienced rider, or if you are pre-occupied with dreams, you may then find yourself seated on the trail in advance of your steed while you contemplate stars that are less real than the fire-flies.

At any rate, it is well to proceed with caution. A wolf may be protecting her pups and "holding you up" until they have waddled out from danger; a moose may be disputing your right to intrude in the sanctity of his realm; a badger may be resenting an interruption to his digging operations; or the beautiful (though certainly objectionable)

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skunk may be leisurely enjoying an evening stroll along the very path which you are pursuing. But you should leave the latter decision, as well as the foregoing, to your broncho. He knows perfectly well that nothing on earth will hurry the movements of the skunk. He knows the terrible protective measure that the skunk has at command in the form of a fluid which he can eject at will—a scent so horrible that a dog will sicken at the first whiff! If it reaches your mount, he will be of no more use to you until he has cast his coat in the following season. If it reaches your clothes, you will have to strip, and proceed the rest of your journey in birthday attire if you have not a ready change of garments, for your fellow-men do not wish to fall sick each time they approach you with a view to conversation.

Fortunately, a broncho is no fool. He understands all these mysteries of the woods much better than you do. Trust him. He will run no risks to his own comfort and safety, or to yours.

“ Well, what do you think of this blindman’s trail? ” asked Rory over his shoulder after the journey had been pursued some distance. He was leading the way in Indian file, and all that

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Fred could see of his friend was a dark mass moving a little way in front of him.

"It's a little bit creepy!" the boy laughed.
"But I am enjoying it all the same."

"Good. It's life to me—that's what it is younker, positive life! Oh, you towns! Think of men being shut up within walls when they might be here!"

"I fancy an electric arc-lamp would come in handy all the same," remarked Fred in amusement, and Rory ejaculated in horror:

"Electric lamp! Great Scott, boy! That's rank sacrilege—that's what it is! Have you no thought for the fire-flies when you talk of electric light in their hearing? It's enough to make a glow-worm shut up his lamp for evermore."

"All the same, it would be a convenience to be able to see where you are going," Fred persisted. He had learned by experience that neither the trapper's words nor tones were always intended to be taken at their face value.

"This sort of thing is all very well if you happen to have the eyes of a cat; but as I happen to be built differently—well, I'd welcome even a farthing candle, and chance hurting the feelings of the fire-flies."

Rory laughed.

"Train your nose, sonny! Bring up your

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nose in the way it should go—not upwards, as some I could mention, but downwards. An Indian can smell his way.”

“ And judging by my own experience of a redskin at close quarters, it wouldn’t take any wonderful nose-training to smell an Indian himself a mile away. As a matter of fact, I feel as if I could smell one now—a sort of mixture of wood, smoke, sour fat, burnt feathers and toffee.”

Again the trapper laughed at his young friend’s humour.

“ You’re getting on! You’ll be a first-class scout one of these days, for you’re right about the nitchies. You’ve hit the nail on the head.”

“ Really? ”

“ And truly. I can feel latitude and longitude in my nerves. That’s the scout training does it. And I know that there’s an Indian camp-ground not far away. It’s at the mouth of Serpent Creek.”

“ Serpent Creek! ” echoed Fred in delight. “ Then, we are near the end of the trip? ”

“ H’m. Yes. Getting on that way,” was the dry response. “ About two more miles.”

“ Only two more? ”

“ Until we reach Serpent Creek. Then it’ll

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be about eight more to Munroe's ranch. We'll get there to-morrow morning."

It is to be supposed from the grunt with which Fred received the latter information that the boy was not overwhelmed with delight. You see, "camping-out," as it is understood in the Old Country, is very pleasant. There is a comfortable tent where a farm is within reach as a depot from which to procure daily supplies of butter and eggs; where it is possible to obtain a decent wash at least once during the day. But it takes a little practice before camping for several days on some parts of the prairie becomes a source of enjoyment. Salt lakes are not the choicest for ablutions, nor is brine generally supposed to improve the flavour of coffee or tea. A saddle may be a comfortable pillow, but one's day clothes are not the most welcome substitute for pyjamas.

So, all things considered, perhaps it was not surprising that Holmes was looking forward to his arrival at "Nowhere" for other reasons besides doing a possible service for a friend. There are few experiences so unpleasant to cleanly persons as to be compelled to remain dirty, as also, of course, there is nothing that dirt-loving people so heartily dislike as enforced bathing.

It was just about this time—when Holmes

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was beginning to feel a little depressed at the unexpected prolonging of the journey—that there came to the boy's ears the welcome (though still distant) sound of running water. It was not the musical tinkle of an infant stream, but the steady, mellow murmur that betokens the presence of patriarchal rivers—the deep bass voice of manhood that encourages one to expect great pools, rapids, cataracts and waterfalls.

“ The Saskatchewan ! ” remarked Stocks laconically, as though he had divined the question in Fred's mind.

“ A bathe ! ” was the joyous reception of the information.

“ We'll camp at the ford to-night,” resumed Rory. “ It ain't a bit of good pushing forward in the darkness when we have a fine place at hand for water, fire, and rest.”

Fred was only too thankful to know that a plentiful supply of water was at hand. He was indifferent to any other feature of the journey for the time being. It did occur to him, however, that he might have suggested proceeding later as far as the Indian camp, where it might have been possible to obtain a slight change of dietary.

But before he had decided whether or not a suggestion under that heading would be

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approved, Stocks seemed to have read his companion's thoughts again.

"There's nobody likes a good square meal more than this child, though I've had a sight more practice with jagged grub than you have, sonny," he said. "But there's good reasons for keeping to ourselves at present. You see, we haven't a pimple of an idea what tribe these redskins are. They might happen to be Chippeways. That wouldn't be right down the best thing for our little picnic."

"Would the Chippeways help Little Wolf?" Fred asked.

"I wouldn't say that they would, though by the same token you never can tell one way or the other when it's a case of redskin against pale-face."

"But I thought you told me that Little Wolf was an outcast from his people?"

"So he is. Just that same. Don't make any mistake about that. He's an outcast right enough."

"Well, then," Holmes argued, "I really don't see what harm it would do if they did get to know what we are after——"

"Not knowing the redskins. That's just it. But you see, sonny, I know a thing or two of Indian nature. I also know that Shontayeega is a chief's brother."

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“ You think that his people would help him—against Munroe? ”

“ Not exactly. But they wouldn’t help us. That would be much the same thing as helping him, I reckon. No. We’ve got to figure out this business by ourselves. You can’t trust any nitchie once he knows that one of his kin is wanted.”

“ Wanted? ” Holmes repeated the word with a laugh. “ One would think that you were a detective, talking of ‘ wanting ’ people. Indeed, this whole business is rather like a page out of Sherlock Holmes! ”

“ Sherlock Holmes! ” came the sarcastic rejoinder. “ I guess that coon wouldn’t have cut much of a figure among Indians. He was a bit of a tracker in his way, I’ll admit—a *bit* of a tracker, mind you. But I guess Holmes would have been soon knocked off his perch if he’d had Indians to deal with. Shontayeega would have laid a blind trail that would have turned Holmes’s brain into churned milk. It takes a tracker born to it to spot Little Wolf at the right time.”

Alas! The speaker did not know that Fate had forestalled man in the “ spotting.” Even at that hour the Sioux were pausing in wonder at the edge of the muskeg; even then some were kneeling by the unconscious object

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that had sent the renegade to his terrible death.

"Well, here's the river at last," the trapper then said.

At these words, Fred flung himself from his horse.

"I am for the water if it drowns me!" he exclaimed joyously.

But a firm hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Wait a bit, sonny; wait a bit! That's not the way we do in the West," was the kindly reproof. "The broncho has done the hardest work, so the broncho gets the first quencher. 'See to the nag first,' is the cowboy's motto. After that, you splash in the Saskatchewan till morning if you've the mind. There's no fear of drowning, neither. The water at the ford wouldn't cover the little toe of a flea."

Fred was annoyed. But there was good sense in the trapper's words. There was also sound justice, and Holmes was too manly not to admit both aspects.

"It seems that I've got a deal to learn," he said, concealing his momentary resentment as best he could by unsaddling, watering, feeding and picketing his horse. "It's decent of you to take the trouble to put me up to the wrinkles, Rory. It will save me from

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appearing an utter ass when I look for work."

"Stick to these sentiments, my son," returned Stocks. "Keep to the bread and butter until you see the cake. Stick to the one girl until you find a better." And then the man began to chant :

"There's only one that I prize,
She has sweet and honest eyes,
We're a happy and care-for-nothing pair;
Her coat is soft and glossy,
Her name is simply 'Flossy'—
She's my sweetheart, is my little broncho mare."

While Rory was trolling these sentiments in a more or less rasping voice, Fred had stripped and plunged into the river which was not quite as shallow in parts as Rory had described it.

Never, the boy thought, had water felt so refreshingly cool. He felt like the discoverer of bathing. He dived and swam and splashed and laughed. And it seemed but a few minutes of joy before he heard his friend hailing him.

"Well, younker! Have you turned into a mink, that you're going to live in the water? How does the thought of coffee strike you? And I've grilled some chicken wings that'll taste like a piece of rainbow fried in sunbeams."

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Dear, dear ! There *was* a pleasant ring in the announcement ! And that fragrant odour that came stealing through the bushes from the glow of the fire beyond—it *did* smell nice ! There was little sign of discontent in the boy's mind now that the sharpness of hunger had manifested itself to whet the appetite. The cold water had rendered him in a fit state to tackle an oak stake or a rump steak—which-ever came first.

“ My hat ! How quick you are ! ” the boy exclaimed as he stood up and shook the water from his body with the action of a terrier. “ Had a wash ? ”

“ And a shave, and a shampoo, and a haircut ! ” was the answer. “ When supper's to be cooked, it doesn't do for everyone to take too long over the etceteras—nor to do them too often over and over again. I guess one wash is good enough for Rory Stocks.”

“ All serene ! ” laughed Fred. “ I'll be with you in half a tick. And say ! That coffee does smell scrumptious ! ”

CHAPTER XVII

HOT ON THE TRAIL

It will be easily understood that the start from the ford next morning was an early one.

So impatient was Holmes that he would have been glad to have set out on the trail without breakfast at the first blink of dawn. But experience had taught him that the reception which such a proposition would receive from his present guide, philosopher and friend might be more frank than delicate. Rory Stocks, as we know, did not pause to pick out nice phrases with which to express an adverse opinion. Breakfast was therefore a foregone conclusion ; so Holmes had to swallow his impatience with less satisfaction than he swallowed the provender which Rory deemed necessary to sustain the body.

But the boy was glad to find himself astride the broncho once more. He was glad to feel the animal bending to attack the hill at the

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other side of the river. Gladder still he was when the prairie again began to slip behind him as, side by side with Rory, the wind whistled past his ears as the broncho cantered over the plain.

And what a glorious moment it was when at last the horsemen paused for a breathing-space upon the brow of the Serpent Creek valley! That was a moment worth living for.

"There's his shack," said the trapper, pointing into the basin of the valley to where a small house stood before a background of poplar bush.

Fred could hardly believe that the journey's end was indeed so near.

"It seems a very small house," he remarked.

"Big enough for one man," was the rejoinder. "And he's got an eye for beauty has our friend Jack Munroe. With that sweep of grass in front leading down to the river, I guess there is no daintier building-site in the whole of Canada—no, nor in the Old Country either."

"I wouldn't like to say that—at least, the bit about the Old Country," rejoined Fred, feeling that it was necessary to say something in support of the homeland. "There are many fine places in England, you know."

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"Narey a doubt about it. And I'll say that it becomes a coon to stick up for the land that raised him. I wouldn't think shucks of him if he didn't. Same time, now—if I was thinking of settling down like a limpet on one section for the rest of my natural, it's just such another spot as this that I would hustle for. And"—this with a sly wink to tease the boy—"I don't think that it would be in the Old Country that I'd look for it first."

"Probably not," returned Holmes promptly. "When a fellow is hunting for his collar-stud, he usually finds it at the bottom of the trunk, not at the top."

"Maybe. Maybe. But the West is good enough for Rory Stocks if Rory Stocks is good enough for the West. Now I guess we'd better be getting on."

The riders began to pick a careful path down the steep slope of the hill. It was not an easy journey, because the spurs which separated the ravines were composed mainly of loose sand and gravel down which the bronchos would slip a yard or two at a time. But the horses did not seem to object, so why need the riders?

"Munroe must be either a very early bird or else a very lazy one," remarked Fred at this juncture. He had been examining the

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homestead as well as he was able from that distance. "To all appearances there's nobody about. I can't see any smoke and both window and door are shut."

"That's so," was Rory's cautious reply. "And what's more, he hasn't milked his cows this morning."

Holmes laughed incredulously.

"Now you are making fun of me!" he said. "But I don't mind. I'll get a chance to return it when I've been out here longer."

But Rory's face was quite serious.

"Indeed, no," he said. "Can't you hear that bellowing? That's cows; and it isn't the mothers calling their calves. It's pain. They've not been milked." Then he added thoughtfully. "It's a bit queer—mighty queer. Jack Munroe's a bit of a hustler. He knows the hour of the day when the best work is done."

"Perhaps he hasn't returned from Regina yet?"

"Looking for you? Not likely. Guess you didn't give the poor coon much hope of finding you, or of meeting a welcome if he did find you, which comes to much the same thing."

"No—poor old chap," said Fred sadly to himself. "It was a beastly thing for me to do."

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I know now that he really meant to do the decent thing."

"And you flung back the offer in his teeth. Well, well, we are all downright blithering idiots at times, and seldom are we so blithering as when we think we're mighty wise."

On reaching the ranch it was found that Fred's surmise had been correct. The door of the shanty was shut; also the windows; and the urgent calls of three full-uddered cattle were fairly conclusive signs that farm duties had been totally neglected that morning, if not the previous evening as well.

Fred knocked at the door, but received no reply. The key was in the lock at the outside. Rory turned it—another indication that there was no person within, since people do not usually lock the door from the outside and then enter through the window.

"This is a rum go!" was Fred's verdict after a casual inspection of the interior. "There's the coat that he was wearing in Regina—on the back of that chair——"

"And the bed has not been slept in. The clothes are quite cold," added Rory, who had plunged his head beneath the smooth coverings.

"And the clock has stopped!"

"And the milk has jellied in the pan!"

"And the stove is as cold as ice!"

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“And the water-pails are dry! You may bet your life that Jack Munroe has not been in this shack for the last twenty-four hours,” completed the trapper.

At the result of these evidences Fred’s heart sank.

“Do you think—” he began hesitatingly—
“do you think that there’s any chance that—that Little Wolf—that he got here before us?”

“He had the start of us——”²

“Nearly a day and a half——”

“Yet I don’t reckon that’s the way of Shontayeega. He wouldn’t be in such a hurry to make away with the fellow.”

“By ‘make away,’ you mean ‘kill’?”
asked Holmes under his breath.

“Just so. There’s one thing that Little Wolf don’t do, and that is, he don’t lay himself out to kill white men. He leaves that for others.”

“Yet he tried to kill me——”

“In a mighty fit of temper. That’s a different song. But give him time to think—well, he knows the Riders of the Plains.¹ He knows that sooner or later they’d track him down and string him up. That isn’t the end

¹ Mounted police.

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that the redskin hankers after. No; Little Wolf would make things smooth for Curtis Newnes to carry out afterwards."

"But I heard Newnes distinctly tell the Indian that the white man was to be out of the way by the time he arrived," argued Fred. But Rory had different ideas.

"I know redskins," he affirmed stubbornly. "That makes all the difference. And I reckon I can size them up better even than Curtis Newnes, clever though he thinks himself."

"Well, in any case, we'll not find him by hanging round here," Fred said. It was with an effort that he tried to shake off the feeling of gloom that had come over him at finding Jack absent. "I suppose we might as well take a look round the stables. What about our bronchos?"

"We can leave them where they are—fixed to the gate-pole for the present. They are safe there, and we may want them soon."

Thoroughly anxious as to Munroe's safety and quite anticipating the worst in spite of Rory's assurances, Fred hurried to the stable. On entering, the strangers were greeted with a welcoming whinny which the trapper's experienced ears translated as the sound of hunger as well as friendly greeting.

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The manger was empty. It had been cleaned of the last blade of hay.

"That tells its own story," the man remarked. "See. There's a couple of buckets, sonny. You fetch some water from the well out there while I tackle the hay-rick."

No sooner did Fred appear in the open with the two pails in his hands than he was stormed by three bellowing cows who were almost frantic on account of their over-burdened udders.

They came charging with anxiety towards the boy. Holmes was obliged to drop his pails and take refuge in the stable again, otherwise he came near to suffering considerably from the demonstrative attentions of the kine.

In spite of the serious thoughts that were occupying his mind at the time, Stocks could not refrain from a burst of laughter as he stood with his arms full of hay while he watched Fred's undignified flight.

"Gee-whiz! There's a fine matador for you! Reminds me of the bull-ring in Mexico. Just wait a tick and I'll come and fix them for you. The poor beasts are half crazy."

Rory's greater experience soon coaxed the animals into stalls where he secured them from giving further annoyance.

"Now then, if you'll just trot back to the

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shanty for a couple of milk-pails, I'll see to these creatures while you water the mare. Steady, old lady! Steady! Oh, yes; I know that you're in no end of a hurry. But you know the saying: 'Too much broth killed the cook.' She must have been mighty hungry and impatient just as you are. But it won't do. Steady, old girl!"

The milking was accomplished, and Fred's energy supplied the needs of the mare. Then the friends set out to pursue their investigations in other directions.

It was not long before the trapper's eye discovered a freshly made trail leading to a certain portion of the river bank—not the old path from the house and straight down the slope.

"That trail is not more than a day or two old," was his verdict after a brief examination. "Yes—there's the mark of heavy boots and—h'm—that line looks like the wheel of a barrow. I guess we'd better follow this up. It is sure to lead us somewhere——"

"Why, of course!" The exclamation came from Fred with sudden illumination. "Of course! What idiots we are!"

"Speak for yourself, sonny. But in what special way do you reckon that we are idiots this time?"

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“ Why, the gold ! Don’t you see ? Probably this leads to the place where he digs for gold. He has been taken ill or—or something of that sort, so that he can’t come back to the ranch. That must be it ! ”

“ Possibly. Or a trick of Little Wolf’s invention. That is more in his line than killing. Shontayeega would find a way to keep a buffalo in a mouse-trap if he had the mind.”

“ At any rate, we’ll soon find out——”

“ And keep your little ‘ shooter ’ handy while you’re at that same ‘ finding,’ ” added Stocks. “ You’ve got to be mighty wide awake when you meet with Little Wolf’s breed.”

“ I am ready enough,” was the confident response.

It needed no great skill to follow these well-defined tracks, and soon the two scouts were in the bed of the river following down its course as we have already seen Munroe do. Rory took the lead in spite of the boy’s anxiety to be first. He believed it was more befitting his years to be foremost with his experience than to permit the boy to take risks that were not necessary.

The tracks were followed with all the speed that the peculiarities of the way allowed. Fred’s eyes were wide open to catch the

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slightest sign of encouragement, while his heart was beating wildly with the spirit of adventure.

Suddenly Rory stopped and held out his left hand as a sign for his companion to follow the example. His right hand went straight to his hip-pocket.

The boy crept close to look over his friend's shoulder.

The two adventurers had reached a bend in the creek—the opening of the golden horse-shoe, in fact.

There was something lying beyond on the sand that at first glimpse struck horror into the boy's heart—something that was torn and ghastly, with protruding bones that had been stripped of their flesh. And a large coyote was gorging his fill—so occupied with the pleasure of the feast that he did not notice the approach of man.

Fred's first thought was that the forced march had been in vain; that these ghastly remains were all that was left of Munroe. A moment's further observation dispelled the hasty conjecture. The carcass had not been so completely mutilated that it was not plainly recognisable as that of a bear.

Rory's revolver spoke twice in rapid succession. There was a howl, a leap into the

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air; after which the wolf lay gasping on the sand.

The trackers hurried forward and looked around.

"That finished the coyote's hash for him!" Fred laughed. "And this is the gold place right enough. See! There are the tools, and the woodwork——"

"Wrecked by that bear," was the result of Rory's examination. "And look there—the marks of boots right down to the edge of the water. They've——" he peered around him—"they have *backed* to the water but—they haven't come back again! Yes; this part of the business is plain enough—and it's got nothing to do with Little Wolf. Munroe had been working—bear came along—fight—then the man took to water—no other escape."

"That sounds right enough," said Fred. He also had been examining the tell-tale tracks which his companion had been translating so readily. "That sounds right enough. But what I do not understand is why he should take to the water if he killed the bear—for I am sure he did that; else why is the body lying there, and close beside it that axe with blood all over the head of it? That must have been what he used for fighting with."

"And that same axe tells the rest of the

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story," said the man. "A grizzly wounded is worse than twenty whole ones. You can take it from me that the bear got his death-blow, as you said; but before the beast died, he turned this bit of creek into a playground for devils. Poor old Munroe might well have been glad to take his chance with the water."

"His chance?" repeated Fred in subdued voice, for Rory's last words had an ominous sound.

"Yes—chance it was, and not much of a chance at that. Listen! Do you hear anything?"

"Only a sort of distant rumble——"

"That's not because of the distance. It's because of the twist in the creek. See how smooth the river is at that point? You know what that means as well as me. It's mighty deep and it's mighty swift. About a hundred yards down, it turns a corner almost at right angles, and breaks off into a steep rapid—all foam, and waves, and rocks——"

"Then, Munroe?" gasped Fred, and the man rejoined solemnly:

"We don't give up hope until we know it's no use. But it would be a miracle if any man passed alive through these rapids. Folks don't go into a place like that and come out smiling."

"Yet—they might?"

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"They might. And we'll stick to that 'might' for the present. It's always best to believe in the miracle until we are forced to switch round the other way. And besides—this case goes against all my reason."

"In what way?"

"Well, reason says, 'That was the end of Jack Munroe.' But my feelings are that things have got to come right for him and you and that brother of yours."

"I only hope that your feelings will prove correct," said Fred, fervently.

"They must!" was the emphatic response, and Holmes said:

"I'm like you. I can't think it possible that a fellow could suffer as he did, and not get a chance. And, Rory—" the boy's voice sank low and trembled slightly—"Rory, if anything *has* happened, I'll be like Munroe, I think; I'll never forgive myself."

"Why so?" questioned the man kindly.

"Because I'll know that it was all my fault."

"I shouldn't let myself think quite like that, if I were you," Rory reasoned in quiet, persuasive tones. "It wasn't your fault that he went gold-finding; it wasn't your fault that he had to face the rapids."

"But it was my fault that sent him here

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alone. And what's worse, Rory ; I see myself just as bad as I thought Munroe was ! I had no right to judge him as I did. Things happen, and we've got to forgive them just as——”

“ Just like Sheen, eh ? ”

“ Yes. Just like him—only, at once—not after long years. My temper—when I left him at the hotel and sent him—to this—it was just as bad every bit as his when he hurt my brother. We were all wrong—altogether wrong ! ”

“ I guess it takes a heap of learning before we find out that two wrongs don't make one right,” was the quiet comment. Then the speaker added briskly : “ Now it's time for us to be getting back to the shanty for our bronchos. I guess our next move is to follow down the river, and see what we can discover that way.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRAPPER'S TRAP

ALTHOUGH Jack Munroe had dubbed his ranch "Nowhere" on account of the remoteness of the locality and the few visitors who appeared in the vicinity, that morning was doomed to see more strangers on that homestead than had been seen there during one day since the youth had first come into occupation.

Hardly had Holmes and the trapper set out on their search in the creek, than a third rider appeared by the Saskatoon trail.

This man came mounted on a sleek, coal-black mare that trod the turf as though her legs were springs, and, as the rider doffed his sombrero and shook his white hair to fully enjoy the morning air, we shall have no difficulty in recognising the couple as Curtis Newnes and his mare Flashlight.

Approaching the shanty, the man pulled rein.

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He saw the two bronchos which were tied to the gate-post, and he paused to consider for a few moments who the owners were likely to be—whether police or ordinary visitors.

Evidently his scrutiny of the trappings soon satisfied him, for he lightly touched the mare with his heels, and trotted forward, dismounted, and allowed Flashlight to graze unrestrained.

With brisk steps he advanced to the door and knocked.

For reasons concerning which we are already informed, no answer was forthcoming. So the visitor opened the door and looked in. Finding the place vacated, he quickly turned away to continue his investigations in the stable.

Still unrewarded, the stranger looked around him.

"That's strange," he remarked to himself. "Evidently Shontayeega has done his work with remarkable promptitude. But where is he? Ah! The horses at the door! I had forgotten about these. Little Wolf has made himself scarce."

Again Newnes turned and looked within the stable.

"Well, there's a corn-bin, anyway," he said complacently. "If the host is not at

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home to offer hospitality, the stranger must look after himself."

He filled a measure and tipped a liberal feed into a pail. Going to the door, he uttered a peculiar whistle that was instantly answered by a neigh, as the black mare was seen trotting up the slope to where her master stood.

"Here you are, old girl! Here's something to cheer you up after your long train journey and night's camp-out. Didn't think much of the train, did you? But you ought to be used to it by this time. The great thing in life is never to let anything worry you. There is always some pleasure in store for you."

Giving the mare a gentle slap, Newnes left her in a loose-box while he returned to the shanty to await events.

Entering the house, he carefully closed the door behind himself, and afterwards proceeded to make an examination of the interior. Evidently he found little to attract him from a superficial inspection. But he was careful to move nothing from its place, or in any way to leave evidence suggesting interference.

He sighed in perfect good humour at his failure to observe any features which interested him. Then he lit a cigar, settled himself in the most comfortable chair, and prepared patiently to await the return of the owners of

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the bronchos which were fretting to be released from the post.

Knowing the assayer's previous intentions, the reader is probably wondering why the man should be now sitting so contentedly in Munroe's shanty.

The answer is simple.

He was not certain that Shontayeega had completed the work that had been entrusted to him. Until he was assured of that, he must be prepared with other tactics.

Of course, Curtis would have preferred the situation to have been minus any possibility of Munroe's return, and he certainly had a very lively hope that such a state would be proved to exist. On the other hand, failing Shontayeega's success, he would adopt a more tedious, but none the less certain, alternative in which Little Wolf would be quickly made to see that he had no share, as a punishment for his tardiness.

It was a simple little plan.

According to previous arrangements, the intention was to put Munroe permanently out of the way so that he would never be able to complete his Government improvements, at the expiration of which time Newnes intended to apply for the quarter section and avail himself of the gold. That was the first plot. But,

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now that the possibility had arisen of Munroe still being in the land of the living, another plot had been quickly evolved in the assayer's fertile brain. On Jack's appearance, he would affect awakened interest in the discovery of the gold—an interest which, he would say, had been the result of further consideration following Jack's visit to the office in Regina.

What was the cause of that fresh interest?

Ah, he had recalled some peculiarity about the quality of the sand that might encourage better prospects than had been the result of the first examination. A wrong decision might seriously mar his reputation, and he could not afford to do that. Oh, no! The professional reputation of Curtis Newnes must needs be carefully guarded. Hence he had not hesitated (at his own expense) to hasten in person to safeguard himself, and, at the same time, do a good turn to a young fellow on the threshold of life.

Of course, it would be necessary for him to examine the place thoroughly. There must be no mistakes a second time. Oh, yes, Curtis Newnes could be trusted. Did not his reputation as the foremost assayer in the west depend, not only on his accurate decisions, but also on his secrecy?

Such a pose, Newnes judged, would disarm

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suspicion. It might eventually prove to be the shortest method after all. Once the secret of the gold was his, then it would be a simple matter for a man of his experience to make it certain that a boy like Munroe should never be able to complete the improvements as ordered by Government. Such things had been done before. They could certainly be done again.

With perfect confidence in his plans and complete faith in his ability to meet any emergency, the old man sat quietly smoking. The path before him seemed quite smooth. What easier than to dupe a boy? The thing was simplicity itself.

Presently he heard the sound of voices. He glanced through the window, but, seeing no person from his position, he threw away the stump of his cigar, lit another, and returned to his chair.

As soon as Holmes and Rory entered, the former immediately recognised the visitor. He was about to enlighten Rory, but the trapper did not give him time to speak.

"Good morning, boss!" he began at once, nodding pleasantly to Newnes who had risen to meet him. "Called to see Jack Munroe?"

"Yes. I had a little business with him—

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rather important business, and I thought a personal interview would be better than writing."

"I see. Guess we might as well sit down. The boss won't mind if we make ourselves at home, will he, Frederick, my son?"

"I suppose not," answered Holmes. He was at a loss what reply to make, for Rory had suddenly assumed a calm air of one who had not a trouble in the world, and never entertained a very serious thought. However, knowing the class of man with whom the trapper had to deal, he wisely judged that it was best to follow his friend's lead as much as possible.

Better still, to say nothing unless pointedly asked.

As it happened, Stocks did not give the boy time to get into any difficulties, for he resumed speaking to Newnes almost immediately as he took a chair, and motioned Fred to occupy the bed as there was only one more chair in the shanty and that, of course, was now given to the assayer.

"This is my young friend from the Old Country. Frederick Holmes is his name," he said by way of introduction. "You may be interested to know at the same time that he is a coon quite after my own heart—after *our*

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own hearts, perhaps I ought to say Mr Newnes."

At the mention of his name, and the peculiar emphasis which was given to the latter words, the assayer darted a sharp look at the trapper, but he did not, by any movement of his body or face betray surprise.

"Yes—" Rory resumed evenly, beginning to fill his pipe and pretending that he had not noticed the suspicious glance; "yes, he's quite after our own hearts. Lots of pluck in him. But you'll be wondering what I'm doing here?"

"I am wondering how you come to know my name," returned the assayer with a conventional smile. "I don't think I ever had the pleasure of meeting you before."

"No? But I reckon different. News travels fast on the prairie. Yes, it's quite remarkable how fast news travels considering the distance."

Newnes looked at the trapper with a patient smile.

"I am afraid that you speak in riddles, Mr ——"

"Riley. Kent Riley. That's my name. I guess it ain't quite unknown to you?"

Holmes was not a little surprised at this fresh view of Rory's tactics. He glanced

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quickly at his friend. Sitting as he did, at the trapper's right side whilst Newnes was at the left and nearest the door, he distinctly saw Rory's right eyelid half-close twice with an unmistakable wink! The assayer was less fortunate, however. He had to content himself with the look from the steady eye.

"'Kent Riley?'" Newnes repeated in slow inquiry, as though the name were utterly foreign to him.

"That same."

"Not—?"

"Go no farther, my friend. You've treed him right go-off. Just the same Kent Riley that you met—*once*, down in California. There's an old score to settle between us I think, Cory Norton. Oh, you don't care about that name? Well, we can stick to the other if it pleases you better. I don't reckon that the second dab of tar is any whiter than the first one."

While Stocks continued speaking in low, even tones that were full of deep meaning that was quite hidden to Fred, it was observable that the self-confident smile was gradually fading from the assayer's face. Now there was fear instead of confidence.

"Yes," Rory resumed as he lit his pipe and puffed steadily. "There's a little score to

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settle. It's about—an old pal of mine. You'll remember the name—Sheen? ”

Newnes was more than slightly disturbed by this time.

“ I think you are mistaken, Mr Riley,” he said with a struggle to regain his previous demeanour. “ I do not remember ever having seen you in my life. My name is not Norton ; it is Newnes—Curtis Newnes—the name you first addressed me by.”

“ As I said before ; I don't reckon the second dab of tar is any whiter than the first,” retorted Rory dryly. “ You've lost your beard and I've grown one since the old days. Your hair's gone white and mine has stayed black. But I guess you are just the same buyer of stolen gold that ever you were. A skunk's nature don't change even though you call him a bird of paradise. You'd best say you're Cory Norton and be done with it.”

“ Well—just to save argument—suppose I do? ”

“ Then we can get down to business. There's that little score that I told you about. You ain't paid for that bullet that you gave Sheen—my pal—though you meant it for me. Your pals got you away that time, but—well, now we are just our two selves and that younker. We can talk things over.”

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Newnes rose and threw the stump of his cigar into a corner with an action of irritation.

"Come now, Riley," he said roughly; "we've had enough of that talk. What are you driving at?"

"Just what I said; that little score." The trapper was unmoved. "I was never one of the killing sort. You know that."

"I know that you could handle a gun as well as the next man——"

"Exactly. Maybe the art is not quite forgotten. It's had mighty good practice—with foxes and wolves."

For some time neither of the occupants of the shanty spoke. Newnes (who had quite failed to grasp the underlying meaning of Rory's last words—a meaning that was probably only known to the speaker at the time) stood in the middle of the room in a fixed attitude of mental concentration. Rory had tilted back his chair with an air of utter ease. Holmes was still seated on the edge of the bed observing the strange duel. But the boy had been apparently forgotten by both the men. Their eyes were fixed on each other—the one man's, with sharp searching; the other's, with what seemed to be amused carelessness.

"Well?" said the assayer at last with a jerk.

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"Well?" drawled the trapper.

Newnes turned sharply and resumed his chair.

"Come on. Let us have no more beating about the bush!" He had entirely forsaken the previous tone and attitude that fitted so well with his benevolent-looking face. "Let's hear what you are driving at, and be done with it!"

Stocks laughed with irritating raillery.

"What a host of a hurry you're in! One would think that you were a school-younger anxious to get over the fence before the boss comes back."

"And—suppose I am?"

"Well—I reckon that there's no need to hurry on that score. He ain't likely to *be* coming back——"

"What?"

Newnes had started up again, uttering this exclamation in absolute astonishment.

"Just what I said," was the answer. "Shontayeega has not forgotten you, and—well, I guess we won't see Jack Munroe this week, at any rate. Which ought to be right enough—oughtn't it—meaning about this little gold business?"

Newnes was quite taken aback by this evidence of the trapper's knowledge. He gave a gasp of astonishment. But the practised

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scoundrel had not received a vain schooling. He quickly rallied his nerves, and once more addressed Rory—this time with calm deliberation equal to that of the trapper himself.

“ I think I see your meaning,” he said with a sneer. “ I see now what you mean by ‘ news travelling fast ’—‘ settling old scores ’—and all that.”

“ Then your extra special reasoning brain has no doubt jumped to what I mean now ? ”

“ I guess I do,” was the response. “ Well, if that is in your mind, perhaps we can come to terms. I am not the one to be hard on an old friend——”

“ H’m. That’s good news,” remarked Stocks sarcastically. “ At the same time, I wouldn’t put it so strong. Best say ‘ old enemies.’ No use shamming between you and me.”

“ Put it whatever way you like. I understand your intentions. But what about that kid ? ”

“ Oh, he’s all right. He’ll follow my leading. You can trust him for that. Won’t you, Frederick, my son ? ”

“ I’m with you,” replied the boy. He tried hard to copy Rory’s manner of ease, but it was difficult, because his heart was thumping with excitement like the beats of a steam-engine.

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"Then, there's nothing to worry about," added Rory. "You can trust us both to do the right thing, Norton."

"Right!" The assayer was resigned to his fate. "I suppose the long and the short of it is that Shontayeega has split the game; and now you want to come in on shares?"

"That depends on what the shares are worth," was the cautious response.

"One half?"

"I'll think about it. But the first trouble that I see is simply this: The property don't belong to you or me."

Newnes laughed aside the obstacle.

"That's easy enough. Munroe has only three months left in which to complete his improvements. I'll see to it that these improvements are never completed. Then he forfeits his claim. Any person can apply for the section then, and—well, I've already lodged an application."

"I see." Stocks nodded thoughtfully. "I see. The intention is clear enough. But I foresee some difficulties in the working. How do you propose to prevent this Munroe from doing his improvements if he's in the mind to?"

"You mentioned Shontayeega," said Newnes suggestively and with a callous smile

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that made Fred itch to drive the sneering lines away by the force of a fist.

"H'm," Rory pondered. "I guess I'm a bit dull to-day. This Shontayeega——"

"He'll see to that part of the arrangements."

"But he's only a redskin. I don't put much stock in redskins myself."

"He has my orders," was the emphatic response.

"To put away or—well, let's be plain—or to kill?"

"To kill!" was the decided answer.

"Then, of course, that settles it."

Giving the last opinion in the same quiet tones as before, Rory slowly tilted his chair forward, yawned, stretched himself and lazily rose to his full height.

"I'm mighty glad to have come to such a pleasant little understanding, Cory Norton—I mean Curtis Newnes," he said. "It's a sight more simple when folks know what other folks are at."

"And so, I suppose, we will hear no more about that 'settling of old scores'?"

"Well, it's this way—times are a bit changed since the California days—changed for both you and me, I reckon. I was a trapper in those days—a trapper of *four-footed* beasts.

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And I did a bit in the whisky-smuggling line as well. Yes, I don't deny it."

"Why should you?" Newnes asked with little interest in these memories of the old days.

"No reason at all," continued the other man. "But there came a time when I gave up that trade. That was when I saw what it did for Sheen and me. Nor am I denying that I swore to be revenged on you, Norton. No. Truth is the order of the day. We'll stick to it. But I learned different after a time. I learned to think that no good ever comes of revenge. I changed my mind as I changed my trade."

"Then, what are you now? A road agent?" was the sneering query.

"Oh, no. I'm still—a—trapper——"

Again the look of suspicion came into the assayer's eyes, but he managed to repeat casually enough:

"Still a trapper? You're rather a puzzle, my friend. One minute you say that you have given up your old business; the next you deny it!"

"Narey a deny!" A quiet chuckle accompanied these words. "I'm still a trapper. Haven't I *just trapped you?*"

The suspicious expression cleared from the old man's face.

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"Oh, I see! Well, I'll admit that you did manage to get ahead of me in a remarkable way. But I know when a man has his hand on the screw. I never was one to bluster when I saw the road was blocked. But enough of this. We are friends and partners now."

"*Eh?*"

The trapper jerked out the word like a pistol-shot. Then his body seemed suddenly to set firmly, and a fierce expression flashed into his face.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"I said, 'friends and partners.' There should be no differences between friends, should there?"

Then Stocks' pent-up rage blazed.

"Between friends—NO! But who said that you and me were friends?"

"Well—I thought——" began Newnes nervously; but the other man cut him short.

"You thought! You thought that you were dealing with a double-dyed skunk like yourself, did you? But you've come to the wrong stable. When I told you that I had a score to settle, I meant it—every word of it. But it isn't my own revenge. It's punishment—just punishment that will come from the hands of other people. I have evidence to prove now

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that you've been planning to take a man's life and steal his property. There's lots more against you that's been difficult to lay at your door. But things are changed to-day. Yes, Cory Norton, I am still a trapper—not much of a trapper of forest snares—but Rory Stocks, the police scout—a trapper of men like you!”

“*Rory—Stocks?*” gasped the old man with staring eyes and blanched cheeks.

“That same!” was the retort.

With these words, the trapper stepped forward to grip his man. But Newnes was still the alert scoundrel of earlier manhood. He sprang to one side, swung his chair in Rory's face, and in a second was outside the shanty and had turned the key in the door. A shrill whistle, and Flashlight cantered briskly towards her master. And by the time Rory had driven a chair through the window and reached the outer air (closely followed by Fred), Curtis Newnes was scudding down the valley with his white hair streaming behind him from his hatless head.

“Quick! Get on your broncho!” Rory ordered sharply. His movements were swift now, but they were calm with the deliberate manner of one who is accustomed to command his wits at emergencies. He was all the keen scout now. The careless trapper of the forest

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had apparently vanished. "Keep close to me, and—don't lose your head!" he directed as he swung into his saddle. "I've got to nail that man. There's a score of crimes to his record. Sit tight! Off!"

CHAPTER XIX

TRIED BY FIRE

WHILE these momentous events were taking place at the ranch called Nowhere, other events—not quite so striking, but none the less important—were taking place at the Sioux camp.

Until early morning, Mrs Rothwell had divided her attentions between Jack Munroe and the old chief, and she had the satisfaction of witnessing the success of her efforts in both instances. The form of malarial fever which had attacked Walking Rain with such severity had changed markedly for the better, while the young rancher's strong constitution had rapidly re-asserted itself with happy results. Of course, Munroe was still very weak as the result of his ordeal with the bear and the cataract. But the several wounds which he had sustained were not severe with one exception. That exception was of such a nature

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that Mrs Rothwell was very reluctant to break the news to the patient.

It was towards noon when the doctor sought her opportunity. She had been talking with Jack of general matters and had learned from him the chief points of the story of his difficult life.

"Well, the next thing for us to do," Mrs Rothwell said at the conclusion of the story, "is to get you back to your home with as little delay as possible. This is all very well here as a makeshift, but there is nothing so conducive to quick recovery as a comfortable bed. Besides, there is the ranch itself to be thought about."

"That's true," returned Jack, a little weakly, we must admit. "The ranch has been looking after itself these days. My cows need milking, and my mare is still in the stable."

"Then, there is no doubt about it. Of course, we could get Chief Man to go up and look after these things for you—and it would be as well to do that in any case for a time. He'll do anything that I ask him. But it seems that we might as well take you home at the same time. It would be better!"

"Much better—if it can be managed."

TRIED BY FIRE

"If? Of course it can!" said the lady decisively. "We can make a stretcher for you. Four Indians shall carry you. And I think it will be best to send to Saskatoon for a nurse. You will not be able to do anything for yourself for several weeks."

"As long as that?" There was sad anxiety in the tone of the question.

"As long; perhaps longer," replied Mrs Rothwell softly.

There was peculiar meaning in the woman's voice. Jack did not fail to notice it. He started a little, and turned his head on the pillow of furs to look at his gentle attendant with an expression of puzzled inquiry.

"Perhaps—longer?" he repeated slowly.

"Yes, Mr Munroe. It is necessary for you to know now, so that you may make needful arrangements."

"But I don't understand!" urged Jack. "There is the bruise on my arm and my head. They hurt a bit. But otherwise there does not seem to be much the matter. I am strong enough—at least, I shall be strong enough to go about my work in a week at the furthest. Fortunately, the bruise on my right leg does not pain me at all."

Mrs Rothwell caught her breath in a way that was suspiciously like a sob.

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"That is just it, Mr Munroe. That is just it. If only it *did* hurt——"

"What a kind wish!" Jack laughed. "And how unlike a doctor! I always imagined that a doctor's chief aim was to relieve pain."

"So it is," was the quiet answer. "But there are some cases when we are glad—yes, glad—to—to see pain."

Then it was that Mrs Rothwell's hints suddenly revealed some deep meaning to the sufferer. The forced smile of the preceding moments faded from his face, and his eyes opened wide with mute inquiry to find the message of sorrow that the woman was trying to convey, though her heart failed her in the doing.

"What is it?" the rancher asked hoarsely. "What is it? Tell me! You want to tell me something—some bad news. What is it? Don't be afraid. I am not a coward——"

"No," was the gentle interruption. "You are not a coward. But there are some things which even strong men—men of great body and muscle—quail at hearing. Do you think that you are well enough to hear news—like—that?"

"Suspense is more torturing than knowledge," answered Jack in a steady voice.

TRIED BY FIRE

“ You need not be afraid to tell me anything.”

The doctor waited for a few minutes before replying.

Presently her voice broke the stillness of the period of mutual thought with motherly tenderness.

“ You told me a long story a little while ago—a story of great sadness—about a strong boy and a weak one—a weak one who has had a heavy cross laid upon him——”

“ Cyril Holmes? Yes. Poor chap, his cross is heavy. Would that God would only lift it from him, or—or let me bear it instead. I think I could be almost happy then.”

“ You—think—so? ” came a question almost whispered. “ Would you be ready to bear such a burden——”

“ If I could free Cyril—yes! ”

“ But suppose—suppose you could not quite lift the cross? Suppose—you were called upon to—to share—the—same—kind of—burden? No, dear friend. Don’t speak yet,” Mrs Rothwell resumed with a sudden effort to accomplish swiftly the unwelcome task. “ Let me finish first. I have asked you about the pain in your right leg. You tell me that you do not suffer there. Will you try to bend it—

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to raise your knee? The bandages will not interfere."

Jack immediately tried to obey the directing. Then his face looked puzzled as he continued the attempt without success. Next moment his cheeks paled with the dread that had flashed into his heart.

"I can't! Mrs Rothwell, I can't move it! There is no feeling at all! I am powerless—helpless!"

The words broke from the poor fellow's lips with an agonised wail.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "It can't be that—that——"

"Yes," was the answer spoken softly, yet firmly. "That is it. There is no pain, because the nerves have been crushed, and I believe they cannot be healed. You will be always—lame."

"*Always—lame?*"

Oh, with what agony were the words wrung from the heart!

"Is there—no—hope?"

"I see none, my friend. It would be wrong of me to deceive you in the smallest degree. You will be strong enough otherwise, but you will never again have power to move that limb."

Jack closed his eyes.

TRIED BY FIRE

“Wait a little, Mrs Rothwell,” he pleaded huskily. “Please wait a little. I can hardly understand it yet. I hardly seem to know what it means. Never to be able to run like other fellows—never to be able even to walk like other fellows—always to hobble—to be a cripple like——”

The eyes suddenly opened again, and it was the clear gaze of a brave man that looked up into Mrs Rothwell’s face. It was the calm voice of a brave man that next spoke. Knowledge had flashed upon Jack like a great light that had been suddenly brought into a place of darkness.

“I understand—now. I have been forgiven since the punishment has come! Not a *suffering* cripple like poor old Cyril. My punishment has been mercifully lessened. Oh, Mrs Rothwell! Can you understand how good the news is to me? It is not ‘bad,’ as you thought. For I am glad—glad to be a cripple like—Cyril.”

And Mrs Rothwell turned aside as she breathed a silent prayer:

“God, if it be Thy will, grant that my knowledge may be at fault—this once!”

CHAPTER XX

THE REWARD

It was a strange procession that entered the Serpent Valley an hour or two later.

On the shoulders of four stalwart Indians was a rough litter made of poles cut from the bush and covered with furs, on which lay Jack Munroe smiling the happiest smile that had been on his face for three years.

At one side of the litter rode Mrs Rothwell. At the other was Chief Man. Several Indians, on foot and horse-back, were following at a short distance.

The long bush trail had been traversed. Now they were entering a considerable stretch of meadow.

Suddenly the procession stopped, for a wild cry had come ringing towards them—a sound that instantly recalled in the savage minds the previous dread of the haunted valley.

“What on earth is that?” said Mrs Roth-

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well, turning to Jack. Then, observing the fear in the faces and actions of the Indians, she faced them with wrath.

"What is the matter with you, cowards? Are you dogs to flee to cover at the first yelp of a wolf, or are you Sioux who fear nothing?"

There was no time to wait for an answer to the taunt, for an exclamation from Jack instantly turned all eyes to look forward.

"See! A rider!"

A black horse was seen to come tearing towards the onlookers at a pace that was utterly reckless. Seated on the horse, with his head so bent that he saw but a few yards in front of him, was a man with snow-white hair streaming in the wind. At the pitch of his voice, like someone distraught, he was urging the animal to greater efforts of speed, though it seemed impossible that any horse could increase such lightning swiftness.

That was one moment. The next—two other figures came into view as following the first rider. They, also, were covering the ground with the speed of hurricanes, and it was noticeable that the leader of the two pursuers was a boy whose steed was, without doubt, the fleetest.

"Stop him!" a man's voice was heard to call. "Stop him—in the King's name!"

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The white head was not raised. The cries to the horse were continued, while the boy crept nearer and nearer to the fugitive.

So frantic was the race that neither rider nor steed seemed to observe the obstacles on the trail until, when within only a few yards, the man looked up. With wonderful strength of arm, he pulled up his broncho so that she lay back on her haunches. Then the man recognised the young rancher who was leaning upon his elbow on the litter.

"You!" he screamed in a passion that was utterly reckless. "This is your fault—curse you!"

A revolver flashed in the air, and pointed for a second at Jack. Next moment a young rider had dashed up from behind, flung himself from his own horse as he threw his arms around the fugitive's neck. The revolver fired harmlessly in the air, but the impetus of the attack sent man and boy tumbling to the ground while the two riderless horses scampered off alone.

Well, what remains to be told?

Of course, Rory soon made short work of the misguided Newnes, and Fred's meeting with Jack was a happy one—especially considering that the prompt action of the former had no

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doubt been the means of saving Munroe's life.

Still happier was that meeting when Jack learned that the younger boy had freely forgiven the old wrong, and had voluntarily come to do this service for his old enemy.

Then, of course, you want to be told of Munroe's future.

Well, even the best of doctors are sometimes wrong, and a traveller, a great surgeon who was resting after using his skill for England's soldiers, was brought from Saskatoon; he straightened the bent limb, and thus gave Munroe a new lease of happiness.

To-day Holmes is an efficient partner in the ranch called "Nowhere." His strenuous labours were the means of saving the homestead from being forfeited. He literally "put his hand to the plough" that autumn from dawn to sunset, and, before the winter set in, had cleared away all doubts as to Jack's rights to the property.

And, now, one other little piece of news, and we have finished.

Last spring serious work was given to the gold-washing. The results were not enormous, but they were by no means disappointing. Yet we doubt if the young partners are

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chiefly happy on account of their luck. Probably their chief happiness is in the knowledge that Cyril Holmes is now a member of the household, and has every comfort and luxury which he needs, and that the pure air of the prairie has brought him such strength that much of the old pain has vanished. Sometimes he suffers more than ordinarily. That is usually at night. But these ordeals are greatly softened by the presence of someone who is ever at his side with ready hands and cheering words—never impatient, never too tired to minister to the sufferer's needs.

It is at such times that Cyril has been heard to say affectionately as he holds a strong hand with his own pale fingers :

“ It's good for a fellow to have such a friend as you are ! I don't think I could bear to live if it were not for you, Jack, old man.”

THE END

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